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SLIME

by

JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

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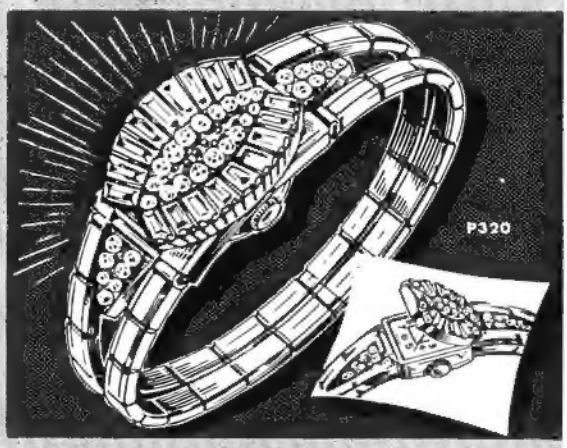

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Weird Tales

March, 1953 Cover by Virgil Finlay

SLIME (A novelette) . . . . . **Joseph Payne Brennan** 6
It was a shape of utter darkness, a black viscid pool of living ooze that flowed like a great filthy carpet. . . .

DON QUIXOTE ON MARKET STREET (Verse) . . . . **Clark Ashton Smith** 11

THE TALKIE DOLLS . . . . . **Donald F. Vieweg** 22
A wonderful game; a delicious game where dreams came true. But how to end it . . . ?

CAVEAT EMPTOR . . . . . **L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt** 31
Is the fraud legitimate when one tries to defraud the devil?

NIGHT COURT . . . . . **Mary Elizabeth Counselman** 36
"De Lawd give each of us a certain po'tion of time to use. And He don't aim for us to cut off de supply dat belong to somebody else."

IN CAMERA . . . . . **John Ward** 47
I've spent so much of my life in the dark brooding land that is Africa that I won't go on record about what might have appeared on any film taken there.

THE RAFT . . . . . **Kirk Shaw** 54
It was a fearsome curse, even to read about: a black soul in a white body was to corrupt even before the grave closed over it.

MRS. PENLEATH'S STRATAGEM . . . . . **T. W. Speight** 61
. . . the whole floor had vanished into the wall save a space at his feet about three feet wide!

THE DREAM MERCHANT . . . . . **Harold Lawlor** 73
Burn a candle; have a dream. The formula was clearly set forth.

WHO ARE WE? (Verse) . . . . . **Frances Rogers Lovell** 77

THE SUPREME WITCH . . . . . **Appleby Terrill** 78
". . . Sir, I have put the young witch away as your worship bid." But she was not, after all, the supreme witch.

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THE EYRIE 70

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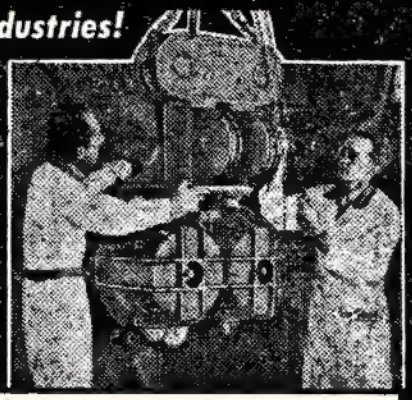

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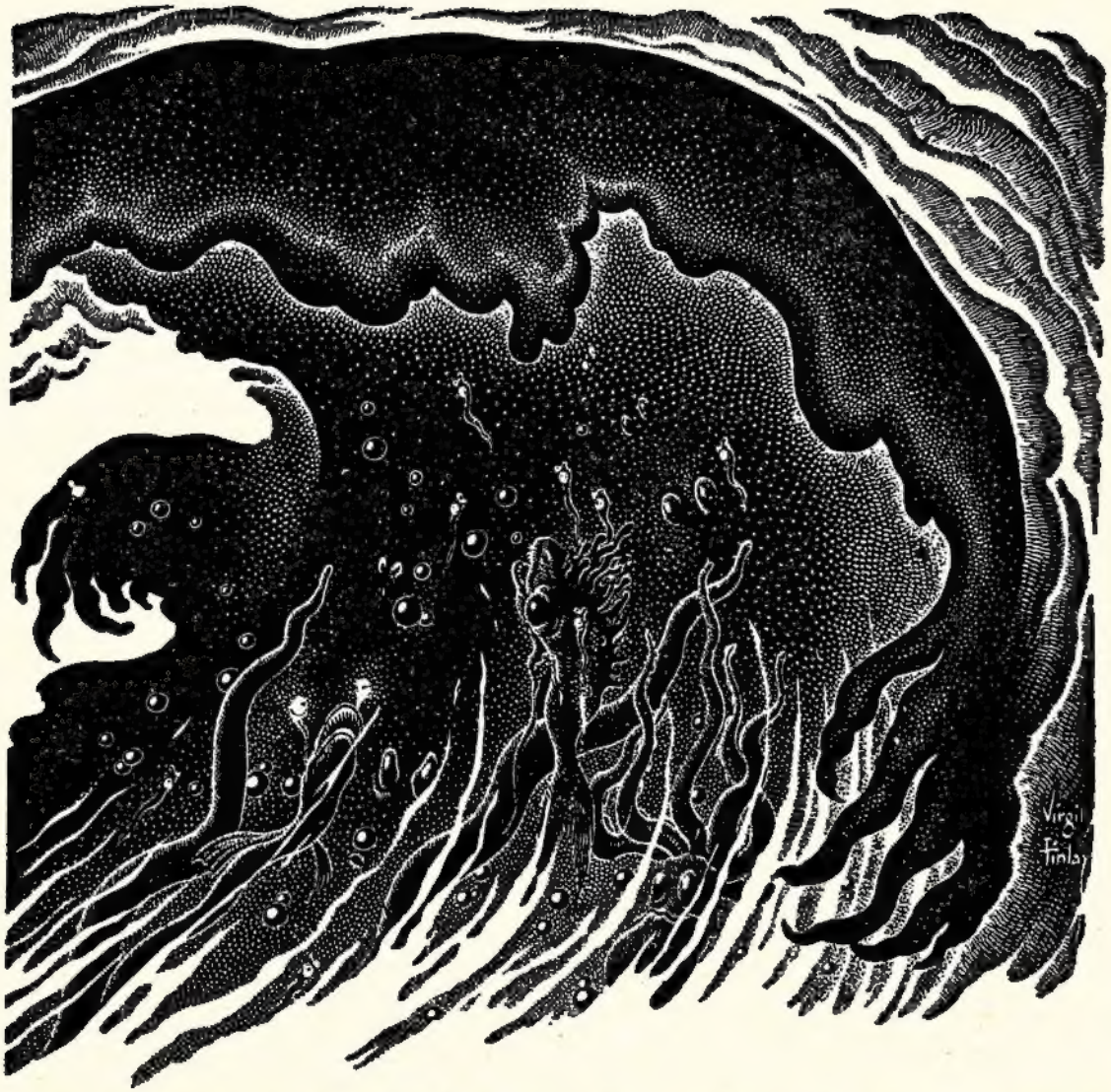
The only description the girl could give was that the "darkness came alive . . . !"

Slime

By Joseph Payne Brennan

Heading by Virgil Finlay

IT WAS a great gray-black hood of horror moving over the floor of the sea. It slid through the soft ooze like a monstrous mantle of slime obscenely animated with questing life. It was by turns viscid and fluid. At times it flattened out and flowed through the carpet of mud like an inky pool; occasionally it paused, seeming to shrink in upon itself, and reared up out of the ooze until it resembled an irregular cone or a



kind of gigantic hood. Although it possessed no eyes, it had a marvelously developed sense of touch, and it possessed a sensitivity to minute vibrations which was almost akin to telepathy. It was plastic, essentially shapeless. It could shoot out long tentacle feelers, until it bore a resemblance to a nightmare squid or a huge starfish; it could retract itself into a round flattened disk, or squeeze into an irregular hunched shape so that it looked like a black boulder sunk on the bottom of the sea.

It had prowled the black waters endlessly. It had been formed when the earth and the seas were young; it was almost as old as the ocean itself. It moved through a night which had no beginning and no dissolution. The black sea basin where it lurked had been dark since the world began—an environment only a little less inimical than the stupendous gulfs of interplanetary space.

It was animated by a single, unceasing, never-satisfied drive: a voracious, insatiable hunger. It could survive for months without food, but minutes after eating it was as ravenous as ever. Its appetite was appalling and incalculable.

On the icy, ink-black floor of the sea the battle for survival was savage, hideous —and usually brief. But for the shape of moving slime there was no battle. It ate whatever came its way; regardless of size, shape or disposition. It absorbed microscopic plankton and giant squid with equal assurance. Had its surface been less fluid, it might have retained the circular scars left by

the grappling suckers of the wildly threshing deep-water squid, or the jagged toothmarks of the anachronistic frillshark, but as it was, neither left any evidence of its absorption. When the lifting curtain of living slime swayed out of the mud and closed upon them, their fiercest death throes came to nothing.

The horror did not know fear. There was nothing to be afraid of. It ate whatever moved, or tried not to move, and it had never encountered anything which could in turn eat it. If a squid's sucker, or a shark's tooth, tore into the mass of its viscosity, the rent flowed in upon itself and immediately closed. If a segment was detached, it could be retrieved and absorbed back into the whole.

The black mantle reigned supreme in its savage world of slime and silence. It groped greedily and endlessly through the mud, eating and never sleeping, never resting. If it lay still, it was only to trap food which might otherwise be lost. If it rushed with terrifying speed across the slimy bottom, it was never to escape an enemy, but always to flop its hideous fluidity upon its sole and inevitable quarry—food.

It had evolved out of the muck and slime of the primitive sea floor, and it was as alien to ordinary terrestrial life as the weird denizens of some wild planet in a distant galaxy. It was an anachronistic experiment of nature compared to which the saber-toothed tiger, the woolly mammoth and even Tyrannosaurus, the slashing, murderous king of the great earth reptiles, were as tame, weak entities.

HAD it not been for a vast volcanic upheaval on the bottom of the ocean basin, the chances are the black horror would have crept out its entire existence on the silent sea ooze without ever manifesting its hideous powers to human kind.

Fate, in the form of a violent subterranean explosion, covering huge areas of the ocean's floor, hurled it out of its black slime world and sent it spinning toward the surface.

Had it been an ordinary deep-water fish, it never would have survived the experience. The explosion itself, or the drastic lessening of water pressure as it shot toward the surface, would have destroyed it. But it was no ordinary fish. Its viscosity, or plasticity, or whatever it was that constituted its essentially amoebic structure, permitted it to survive.

It reached the surface slightly stunned and flopped on the surging waters like a great blob of black blubber. Immense waves stirred up by the subterranean explosion swept it swiftly toward shore, and because it was somewhat stunned, it did not try to resist the roaring mountains of water.

Along with scattered ash, pumice and the puffed bodies of dead fish, the black horror was hurled toward a beach. The huge waves carried it more than a mile inland, far beyond the strip of sandy shore, and deposited it in the midst of a deep brackish swamp area.

As luck would have it, the submarine explosion and subsequent tidal wave took place at night, and therefore the slime horror was not immediately subjected to a new and hateful experience—light.

Although the midnight darkness of the storm-lashed swamp did not begin to compare with the stygian blackness of the sea bottom where even violet rays of the spectrum could not penetrate, the marsh darkness was nevertheless deep and intense.

As the waters of the great wave receded, sluicing through the thorn jungle and back out to sea, the black horror clung to a mud bank surrounded by a rank growth of cattails. It was aware of the sudden, startling change in its environment and for some time it lay motionless, concentrating its attention on obscure internal readjustment which the absence of crushing pressure and a surrounding cloak of frigid sea water demanded. Its adaptability was incredible and horrifying. It achieved in a few hours what an ordinary creature could have attained only through a process of gradual evolution. Three hours after the titanic wave flopped it onto the mud bank, it had undergone swift organic changes which left it relatively at ease in its new environment.

In fact, it felt lighter and more mobile than it ever had before in its sea basin existence.

As it flung out feelers and attuned itself

to the minutest vibrations and emanations of the swamp area, its pristine hunger drive reasserted itself with overwhelming urgency. And the tale which its sensory apparatus returned to the monstrous something which served it as a brain, excited it tremendously. It sensed at once that the swamp was filled with luscious tidbits of quivering food—more food, and food of greater variety than it had ever encountered on the cold floor of the sea.

Its savage, incessant hunger seemed unbearable. Its slimy mass was swept by a shuddering wave of anticipation.

SLIDING off the mud bank, it slithered over the cattails into an adjacent area consisting of deep black pools interspersed with water-logged tussocks. Weed stalks stuck up out of the water and the decayed trunks of fallen trees floated half-submerged in the larger pools.

Ravenous with hunger, it sloshed into the bog area, flicking its fluid tentacles about. Within minutes it had snatched up several fat frogs and a number of small fish. These, however, merely titillated its appetite. Its hunger turned into a kind of ecstatic fury. It commenced a systematic hunt, plunging to the bottom of each pool and quickly but carefully exploring every inch of its oozy bottom. The first creature of any size which it encountered was a muskrat. The terrified rodent never had a chance. An immense curtain of adhesive slime suddenly swept out of the darkness, closed upon it—and squeezed.

Heartened and whetted by its find, the hood of horror rummaged the rank pools with renewed zeal. When it surfaced, it carefully probed the tussocks for anything that might have escaped it in the water. Once it snatched up a small bird nesting in some swamp grass. Occasionally it slithered up the crisscrossed trunks of fallen trees, bearing them down with its unspeakable slimy bulk, and hung briefly suspended like a great dripping curtain of black marsh mud.

It was approaching a somewhat less swampy and more deeply wooded area when it gradually became aware of a subtle change in its new environment. It paused, hesitating, and remained half in and half out of a small pond near the edge of the nearest trees.

Although it had absorbed twenty-five or thirty pounds of food in the form of frogs fish, water snakes, the muskrat and a few smaller creatures, its fierce hunger had not left it. Its monstrous appetite urged it on, and yet something held it anchored in the pond.

What it sensed, but could not literally see, was the rising sun spreading a gray light over the swamp. The horror had never encountered any illumination except that generated by the grotesque phosphorescent appendages of various deep-sea fishes. Natural light was totally unknown to it.

As the dawn light strengthened, breaking through the scattering storm clouds, the black slime monster fresh from the inky floor of the sea sensed that something utterly unknown and probably inimical was flooding in upon it. The light was hateful to it. It cast out quick feelers, hoping to catch the light and crush it, and if possible, eat it. But the more frenzied its efforts became, the more intense became the hateful something surrounding it.

At length, as the sun rose visibly above the trees, the horror, in baffled rage rather than in fear, grudgingly slid back into the pond and burrowed into the sofe ooze at its bottom. There it remained while the sun shone and the small creatures of the swamp ventured forth on furtive errands.

A FEW miles away from Wharton's Swamp, in the small town of Clinton Center, Henry Hossing sleepily crawled out of the improvised alley shack which had afforded him a degree of shelter for the night and stumbled into the street. Passing a hand across his rheumy eyes, he scratched the stubble on his cheek and blinked listlessly at the rising sun. He had not slept well; the storm of the night before had kept him awake. Besides, he had gone to bed hungry, and that never agreed with him.

Glancing furtively along the street, he walked slouched forward, with his head bent down, and most of the time he kept his eyes on the walk or on the gutter in the hopes of spotting a chance coin.

Clinton Center had not been kind to him. The handouts were sparse, and only yesterday he had been warned out of town by one of the local policemen.

Grumbling to himself, he reached the end of the street and started to cross. Suddenly he stooped quickly and snatched up something from the edge of the pavement.

It was a crumbled green bill, and as he frantically unfolded it, a look of stupefied rapture spread across his bristly face. Ten dollars! More money than he had possessed at any one time in months!

Stowing it carefully in the one good pocket of his seedy gray jacket, he crossed the street with a swift stride. Instead of sweeping the sidewalks, his eyes now darted along the rows of stores and restaurants.

He paused at one restaurant, hesitated, and finally went on until he found another less pretentious one a few blocks away.

When he sat down, the counterman shook his head. "Get goin', bud. No free coffee today."

With a wide grin, the hobo produced his ten-dolar bill and spread it on the counter. "That covers a good breakfast here, pardner?"

The counterman seemed irritated. "O. K. O. K. What'll you have?" He eyed the bill suspiciously.

Henry Hossing ordered orange juice, toast, ham and eggs, oatmeal, melon and coffee.

When it appeared, he ate every bit of it, ordered three additional cups of coffee, paid the check as if two-dollar breakfasts were customary with him, and then sauntered back to the street.

Shortly after noon, after his three-dollar lunch, he saw the liquor store. For a few minutes he stood across the street from it, fingering his five-dollar bill. Finally he crossed with an abstracted smile, entered and bought a quart of rye.

He hesitated on the sidewalk, debating whether or not he should return to the little shack in the side alley. After a minute or two of indecision, he decided against it and struck out instead for Wharton's Swamp. The local police were far less likely to disturb him there, and since the skies were clearing and the weather mild, there was little immediate need of shelter.

Angling off the highway which skirted the swamp several miles from town, he crossed a marshy meadow, pushed through a fringe of brush and sat down under a sweet-gum tree which bordered a deeply wooded area.

BY LATE afternoon he had achieved a quite cheerful glow, and he had little inclination to return to Clinton Center. Rousing himself from reverie, he stumbled about collecting enough wood for a small fire and went back to his sylvan seat under the sweet-gum.

He slept briefly as dusk descended, finally bestirred himself again to build a fire as deeper shadows fell over the swamp. Then he returned to his swiftly diminishing bottle.

He was suspended in a warm net of inflamed fantasy when something abruptly broke the spell and brought him back to earth.

The flickering flames of his fire had dwindled down until now only a dim eerie glow illuminated the immediate area under the sweet-gum. He saw nothing and at the moment heard nothing and yet he was filled with a sudden and profound sense of lurking menace.

He stood up, staggering, leaned back against the sweet-gum and peered fearfully into the shadows. In the deep darkness beyond the waning arc of fire light he could distinguish nothing which had any discernible form or color.

Then he detected the stench and he suddenly shuddered. In spite of the reek of cheap whiskey which clung about him, the smell was overpowering. It was a heavy, fulsome fetor, alien and utterly repellent. It was vaguely fish-like, but otherwise beyond any known comparison.

As he stood trembling under the sweet-gum, Henry Hossing thought of something dead which had lain for long ages at the bottom of the sea.

Filled with mounting alarm, he looked around for some wood which he might add to the dying fire. All he could find nearby however were a few twigs. He threw these

on and the flames licked up briefly and subsided.

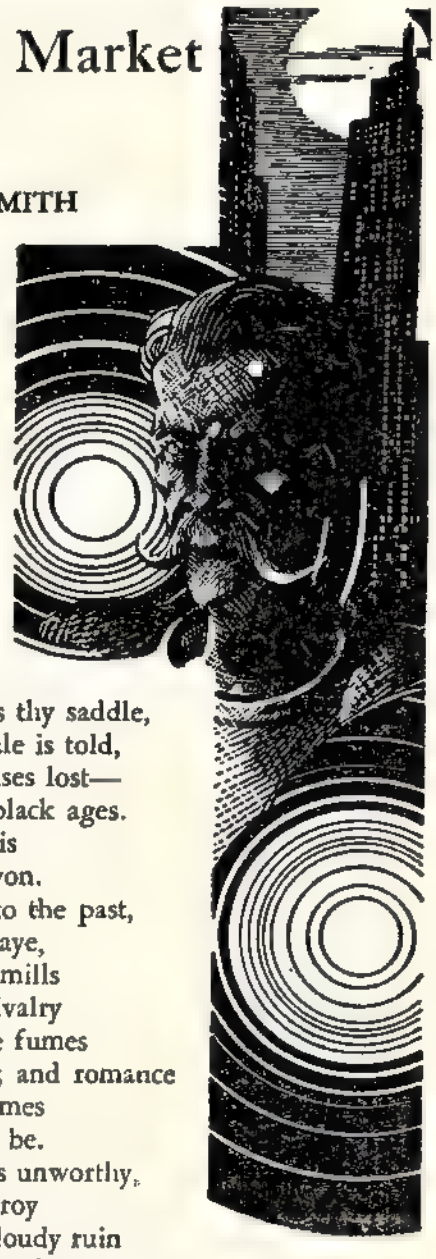
He listened and heard—or imagined he heard—an odd sort of slithering sound in the nearby bushes. It seemed to retreat slightly as the flames shot up.

Genuine terror took possession of him. He knew that he was in no condition to flee—and now he came to the horrifying conclusion that whatever unspeakable menace waited in the surrounding darkness was temporarily held at bay only by the failing gleam of his little fire.

Frantically he looked around for more

Don Quixote on Market Street

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH



RIDING on Rosinante where the cars
With dismal unremitting clangors pass,
And people move like curbless energumens
Rowelled by fiends of fury back and forth,
Behold! Quixote comes, in battered mail,
Armgaunt, with eyes of some keen haggard hawk
Far from his eyrie. Gazing right and left,
Over his face a lightning of disdain
Flashes, and limns the hollowness of cheeks
Bronzed by the suns of battle; and his hand
Tightens beneath its gauntlet on the lance
As if some foe had challenged him, or sight
Of unredressed wrong provoked his ire. . . .

Brave spectre, what chimera shares thy saddle,
Pointing thee to this place? Thy tale is told,
The high, proud legend of all causes lost—
A quenchless torch emblazoning black ages.
Go hence, deluded paladin: there is
No honor here, nor glory, to be won.
Knight of La Mancha, turn thee to the past,
Amid its purple marches ride for aye,
Nor tilt with thunder-driven iron mills
That shall grind on to silence. Chivalry
Has flown to stars unsooted by the fumes
That have befouled these heavens; and romance
Departing, will unfurl her oriflammes
On towers unbuilded in an age to be.
Waste not thy knightliness in wars unworthy,
For time and his alastors shall destroy
Full soon, and brings to stuffless, cloudy ruin
All things that fret thy spirit, riding down
This pass with pandemonian walls, this Hinnom
Where Moloch and where Mammon herd the doomed.

wood. But there was none. None, that is, within the faint glow of firelight. And he dared not venture beyond.

He began to tremble uncontrollably. He tried to scream but no sound came out of his tightened throat.

The ghastly stench became stronger, and now he was sure that he could hear a strange sliding, slithering sound in the black shadows beyond the remaining spark of firelight.

He stood frozen in absolute helpless panic as the tiny fire smouldered down into darkness.

At the last instant a charred bit of wood broke apart, sending up a few sparks, and in that flicker of final light he glimpsed the horror.

It had already glided out of the bushes and now it rushed across the small clearing with nightmare speed. It was a final incarnation of all the fears, shuddering apprehensions and bad dreams which Henry Hossing had ever known in his life. It was a fiend from the pit of hell come to claim him at last.

A terrible ringing scream burst from his throat, but it was smothered before it was finished as the black shape of slime fastened upon him with irresistible force.

GILES GOWSE—"Old Man" Gowse—got out of bed after eight hours of fitful tossing and intermittent nightmares and grouchily brewed coffee in the kitchen of his dilapidated farmhouse on the edge of Wharton's Swamp. Half the night, it seemed, the stench of stale sea-water had permeated the house. His interrupted sleep had been full of foreboding, full of shadowy and evil portents.

Muttering to himself, he finished breakfast, took a milk pail from the pantry and started for the barn where he kept his single cow.

As he approached the barn, the strange offensive odor which had plagued him during the night assailed his nostrils anew.

"Wharton's Swamp! That's what it is!" he told himself. And he shook his fist at it.

When he entered the barn the stench was stronger than ever. Scowling, he strode toward the rickety stall where he kept the cow, Sarey.

Then he stood stone still and stared. Sarey was gone. The stall was empty.

A quick look assured him that the barn was empty.

He reentered the barnyard. "Sarey!" he called, idiotically.

Rushing back into the barn, he inspected the stall. The rancid reek of the sea was strong here and now he noticed a kind of shine on the floor. Bending closer, he saw that it was a slick coat of glistening slime, as if some unspeakable creature covered with ooze had crept in and out of the stall.

This discovery, coupled with the weird disappearance of Sarey, was too much for his jangled nerves. With a wild yell he ran out of the barn and started for Clinton Center, two miles away.

His reception in the town enraged him. When he tried to tell people about the disappearance of his cow, Sarey, about the reek of the sea the night before, and about the ooze in his barn, they laughed at him. The more impolite ones, that is. Most of the others patiently heard him out—and then winked and touched their heads significantly when he was out of sight.

One man, the druggist, Jim Jelinson, seemed mildly interested. He said that as he was coming through his backyard from the garage late the previous evening, he had heard a fearful shriek somewhere in the distant darkness. It might, he averred, have come from the direction of Wharton's Swamp. But it had not been repeated and eventually he had dismissed it from his mind.

When Old Man Gowse started for home late in the afternoon, he was filled with sullen, resentful bitterness. They thought he was crazy, hey? Well, Sarey *was* gone; they couldn't explain *that* away, could they? They explained the smell by saying it was dead fish cast up by the big wave which had washed into the swamp during the storm. Well—maybe. And the slime on his barn floor they said was snails! *Snails!* As if any snail he'd ever seen could cause that much slime!

As he was nearing home, he met Rupert Barnaby, his nearest neighbor. Rupert was

carrying a rifle and he was accompanied by Jibbe, his hound.

Although there had been an element of bad blood between the two bachelor neighbors for some time, Old Man Gowse, much to Barnaby's surprise, nodded and stopped.

"Evenin' hunt, neighbor?"

Barnaby nodded. "Thought Jibbe might start up a coon. Moon later, likely."

"My cow's gone," Old Man Gowse said abruptly. "If you should see her—" He paused. "But I don't think you will. . . ."

Barnaby, bewildered, stared at him. "What you gettin' at?"

Old Man Gowse repeated what he had been telling all day in Clinton Center.

He shook his head when he finished, adding, "I wouldn't go huntin' in that swamp tonight fer—ten thousand dollars!"

Rupert Barnaby threw back his head and laughed. He was a big man, muscular, resourceful and level-headed—little given to even mild flights of the imagination.

"Gowse," he laughed, "no use you givin' me those spook stories! Your cow just got loose and wandered off. Why, I ain't even seen a bobcat in that swamp for over a year!"

Old Man Gowse set his lips in a grim line. "Maybe," he said as he turned away, "you'll see suthin' worse than a wildcat in that swamp tonight!"

Shaking his head, Barnaby took off after his impatient hound. Old man Gowse was getting queer all right. One of these days he'd probably go off altogether and have to be locked up.

Jibbe ran ahead, sniffing, darting from one ditch to another. As twilight closed in, Barnaby angled off the main road onto a twisting path which led directly into Wharton's Swamp.

He loved hunting. He would rather tramp through the brush than sit home in an easy chair. And even if an evening's foray turned up nothing, he didn't particularly mind. Actually he made out quite well; at least half his meat supply consisted of the rabbits, racoons and occasional deer which he brought down in Wharton's Swamp.

When the moon started to rise, he was deep in the swamp. Twice Jibbe started off after rabbits, but both times he returned quickly, looking somewhat sheepish.

SOMETHING about his actions began to puzzle Barnaby. The dog seemed reluctant to move ahead; he hung directly in front of the hunter. Once Barnaby tripped over him and nearly fell headlong.

The hunter paused finally, frowning, and looked about. The swamp appeared no different than usual. True, a rather offensive stench hung over it, but that was merely the result of the big waves which had splashed far inland during the recent storm. Probably an accumulation of seaweed and the decaying bodies of some dead fish lay rotting in the stagnant pools of the swamp.

Barnaby spoke sharply to the dog. "What ails you, boy? Git now! You trip me again, you'll get a boot!"

The dog darted ahead some distance, but with an air of reluctance. He sniffed the clumps of marsh grass in a perfunctory manner and seemed to have lost interest in the hunt.

Barnaby grew exasperated. Even when they discovered the fresh track of a racoon in the soft mud near a little pool, Jibbe manifested only slight interest.

He did run on ahead a little further however, and Barnaby began to hope that, as they closed in, he would regain his customary enthusiasm.

In this he was mistaken. As they approached a thickly wooded area, latticed with tree horns and covered with a heavy growth of cattails, the dog suddenly crouched in the shadows and refused to budge.

Barnaby was sure that the racoon had taken refuge in the nearby thickets. The dog's unheard of conduct infuriated him.

After a number of sharp cuffs, Jibbe arose stiffly and moved ahead, the hair on his neck bristled up like a lion's mane.

Swearing to himself, Barnaby pushed into the darkened thickets after him.

It was quite black under the trees, in spite of the moonlight, and he moved cautiously in order to avoid stepping into a pool.

Suddenly, with a frantic yelp of terror, Jibbe literally darted between his legs and shot out of the thickets. He ran on, howling weirdly as he went.

For the first time that evening Barnaby experienced a thrill of fear. In all his previous experience, Jibbe had never turned tail. On one occasion he had even plunged in after a sizable black bear.

Scowling into the deep darkness, Barnaby could see nothing. There were no baleful eyes glaring at him.

As his own eyes tried to penetrate the surrounding blackness, he recalled Old Man Gowse's warning with a bitter grimace. If the old fool happened to spot Jibbe streaking out of the swamp, Barnaby would never hear the end of it.

The thought of this angered him. He pushed ahead now with a feeling of sullen rage for whatever had terrified the dog. A good rifle shot would solve the mystery.

All at once he stopped and listened. From the darkness immediately ahead, he detected an odd sound. It was a sort of slithering, sliding sound, as if a large bulk were being dragged over the cattails.

He hesitated, unable to see anything, stoutly resisting an idiotic impulse to flee. The black darkness and the slimy stench of stagnant pools here in the thickets seemed to be suffocating him.

His heart began to pound as the slithering noise came closer. Every instinct told him to turn and run, but a kind of desperate stubbornness held him rooted to the spot.

The sound grew louder and suddenly he was positive that something deadly and formidable was rushing toward him through the thickets with accelerated speed.

Throwing up his rifle, he pointed at the direction of the sound and fired.

In the brief flash of the rifle he saw something black and enormous and glistening, like a great flapping hood, break through the final thicket. It seemed to be *rolling* toward him, and it was moving with nightmare swiftness.

He wanted to scream and run, but even as the horror rushed forward, he understood that flight at this point would be futile. Even though the blood seemed to have congealed in his veins, he held the rifle pointed up and kept on firing.

The shots had no more visible effect than so many pebbles launched from a slingshot.

At the last instant his nerve broke and he tried to escape, but the monstrous hood lunged upon him, flapped over him and squeezed, and his attempt at a scream turned to a tiny gurgle in his throat.

OLD Man Gowse got up early, after another uneasy night, and walked out to inspect the barnyard area. Nothing further seemed amiss, but there was still no sign of Sarey. And that detestable odor arose from the direction of Wharton's Swamp when the wind was right.

After breakfast, Gowse set out for Rupert Barnaby's place, a mile or so distant along the road. He wasn't sure himself what he expected to find.

When he reached Barnaby's small but neat frame house, all was quiet. Too quiet. Usually Barnaby was up and about soon after sunrise.

On a sudden impulse, Gowse walked up the path and rapped on the front door. He waited and there was no reply. He knocked again, and after another pause, stepped off the porch.

Jibbe, Barnaby's hound, slunk around the side of the house. Ordinarily he would bound about and bark. But today he stood motionless—or nearly so, he was trembling—and stared at Gowse. The dog had a cowed, frightened, guilty air which was entirely alien to him.

"Where's Rup?" Gowse called to him. "Go get Rup!"

Instead of starting off, the dog threw back his head and emitted an eerie, long-drawn howl.

Gowse shivered. With a backward glance at the silent house, he started off down the road.

Now maybe they'd listen to him, he thought grimly. The day before they had laughed about the disappearance of Sarey. Maybe they wouldn't laugh so easily when he told them that Rupert Barnaby had gone into Wharton's Swamp with his dog—and that the dog had come back alone!

WHEN Police Chief Miles Underbeck saw Old Man Gowse come into headquarters in Clinton Center, he sat back and sighed heavily. He was busy this morning,

and undoubtedly Old Man Gowse was coming in to inquire about that infernal cow of his that had wandered off.

The old eccentric had a new and startling report however. He claimed that Rupert Barnaby was missing. He'd gone into the swamp the night before, Gowse insisted, and had not returned.

When Chief Underbeck questioned him closely, Gowse admitted that he wasn't *positive* Barnaby hadn't returned. It was barely possible that he had returned home very early in the morning and then left again before Gowse arrived.

But Gowse fixed his flashing eyes on the Chief and shook his head. "He never came out, I tell ye! That dog of his knows! Howled, he did, like a dog howls for the dead! Whatever come took Sarey—got Barnaby in the swamp last night!"

Chief Underbeck was not an excitable man. Gowse's burst of melodrama irritated him and left him unimpressed.

Somewhat gruffly he promised to look into the matter if Barnaby had not turned up by evening. Barnaby, he pointed out, knew the swamp better than anyone else in the county. And he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Probably, the Chief suggested, he had sent the dog home and gone elsewhere after finishing his hunt the evening before. The chances were he'd be back by suppertime.

Old Man Gowse shook his head with a kind of fatalistic skepticism. Vouching that events would soon prove his fears well-founded, he shambled grouchily out of the station.

The day passed and there was no sign of Rupert Barnaby. At six o'clock, Old Man Gowse grimly marched into the Crown, Clinton Center's second-rung hotel, and registered for a room. At seven o'clock Chief Underbeck dispatched a prowl car to Barnaby's place.

He waited impatiently for its return, drumming on the desk, disinterestedly shuffling through a sheaf of reports which had accumulated during the day.

The prowl car returned shortly before eight. Sergeant Grimes made his report. "Nobody there, sir. Place locked up tight. Searched the grounds. All we saw was Barnaby's dog. Howled and ran off as if the devil were on his tail!"

Chief Underbeck was troubled. If Barnaby *was* missing, a search should be started at once. But it was already getting dark, and portions of Wharton's Swamp were very nearly impassable even during the day. Besides, there was no proof that Barnaby had not gone off for a visit, perhaps to nearby Stantonville, for instance, to call on a crony and stay overnight.

By nine o'clock he had decided to postpone any action till morning. A search now would probably be futile in any case. The swamp offered too many obstacles. If Barnaby had not turned up by morning, and there was no report that he had been seen elsewhere, a systematic search of the marsh area could be started.

Not long after he had arrived at this decision, and as he was somewhat wearily preparing to leave Headquarters and go home, a new and genuinely alarming interruption took place.

SHORTLY before nine-thirty, a car braked to a sudden stop outside Headquarters. An elderly man hurried in, supporting by the arm a sobbing, hysterical young girl. Her skirt and stockings were torn and there were a number of scratches on her face.

After assisting her to a chair, the man turned to Chief Underbeck and the other officers who gathered around.

"Picked her up on the highway out near Wharton's Swamp. Screaming at the top of her lungs!" He wiped his forehead. "She ran right in front of my car. Missed her by a miracle. She was so crazy with fear I couldn't make any sense out of what she said. Seems like something grabbed her boy friend in the bushes out there. Anyway, I got her in the car without much trouble and I guess I broke a speed law getting here."

Chief Underbeck surveyed the man keenly. He was obviously shaken himself, and since he did not appear to be concealing anything, the Chief turned to the girl.

He spoke soothingly, doing his best to reassure her, and at length she composed herself sufficiently to tell her story.

Her name was Dolores Rell and she lived in nearby Stantonville. Earlier in the eve-

ning she had gone riding with her fiance, Jason Bukmeist of Clinton Center. As Jason was driving along the highway adjacent to Wharton's Swamp, she had remarked that the early evening moonlight looked very romantic over the marsh. Jason had stopped the car, and after they had surveyed the scene for some minutes, he suggested that since the evening was warm, a brief "stroll in the moonlight" might be fun.

Dolores had been reluctant to leave the car, but at length had been persuaded to take a short walk along the edge of the marsh where the terrain was relatively firm.

As the couple were walking along under the trees, perhaps twenty yards or so from the car, Dolores became aware of an unpleasant odor and wanted to turn back. Jason, however, told her she only imagined it and insisted on going further. As the trees grew closer together, they walked Indian file, Jason taking the lead.

Suddenly, she said, they both heard something swishing through the brush toward them. Jason told her not to be frightened, that it was probably somebody's cow. As it came closer however, it seemed to be moving with incredible speed. And it didn't seem to be making the kind of noise a cow would make.

At the last second Jason whirled with a cry of fear and told her to run. Before she could move, she saw a monstrous something rushing under the trees in the dim moonlight. For an instant she stood rooted with horror; then she turned and ran. She thought she heard Jason running behind her. She couldn't be sure. But immediately afterward she heard him scream.

In spite of her terror, she turned and looked behind her.

At this point in her story she became hysterical again and several minutes passed before she could go on.

She could not describe exactly what she had seen as she looked over her shoulder. The thing which she had glimpsed rushing under the trees had caught up with Jason. It almost completely covered him. All she could see of him was his agonized face and part of one arm, low near the ground, as if the thing were squatting astride him. She could not say what it was. It was black, formless, bestial and yet not bestial. It was the dark, gliding kind of indescribable horror which she had shuddered at when she was a little girl alone in the nursery at night.

She shuddered now and covered her eyes as she tried to picture what she had seen. "O God—*the darkness came alive! The darkness came alive!*"

Somehow, she went on presently, she had stumbled through the trees into the road. She was so terrified she hardly noticed the approaching car.

THERE could be no doubt that Dolores Rell was clutched in the grip of genuine terror. Chief Underbeck acted with alacrity. After the white-faced girl had been driven to a nearby hospital for treatment of her scratches and the administration of a sedative, Underbeck rounded up all available men on the force, equipped them with shotguns, rifles and flashlights, hurried them into four prowl cars and started off for Wharton's Swamp.

Jason Bukmeist's car was found where he had parked it. It had not been disturbed. A search of the nearby swamp area, conducted in the glare of flashlight, proved fruitless however. Whatever had attacked Bukmeist had apparently carried him off into the farthest recesses of the sprawling swamp.

After two futile hours of brush breaking and marsh sloshing, Chief Underbeck wearily rounded up his men and called off the hunt until morning.

As the first faint streaks of dawn appeared in the sky over Wharton's Swamp, the search began again. Reinforcements, including civilian volunteers from Clinton Center, had arrived, and a systematic combing of the entire swamp commenced.

By noon, the search had proved fruitless —or nearly so. One of the searchers brought in a battered hat and a rye whiskey bottle which he had discovered on the edge of the marsh under a sweet-gum tree. The shapeless felt hat was old and worn, but it was dry. It had, therefore, apparently been discarded in the swamp since the storm of a few days before. The whiskey bottle looked new; in fact, a few drops of rye remained in it. The searcher reported that the remains of a small campfire were also found under the sweet-gum.

In the hope that this evidence might have some bearing on the disappearance of Jason Bukmeist, Chief Underbeck ordered a canvass of every liquor store in Clinton Center in an attempt to learn the names of everyone who had recently purchased a bottle of the particular brand of rye found under the tree.

The search went on, and mid-afternoon brought another, more ominous discovery. A diligent searcher, investigating a trampled area in a large growth of cattails, picked a rifle out of the mud.

After the slime and dirt had been wiped away, two of the searchers vouched that it belonged to Rupert Barnaby. One of them had hunted with him and remembered a bit of scrollwork on the rifle stock.

While Chief Underbeck was weighing this unpalatable bit of evidence, a report of the liquor store canvass in Clinton Center arrived. Every recent purchaser of a quart bottle of the particular brand in question had been investigated. Only one could not be located—a tramp who had hung around the town for several days and had been ordered out.

By evening most of the exhausted searching party were convinced that the tramp, probably in a state of homicidal viciousness brought on by drink, had murdered both Rupert Barnaby and Jason and secreted their bodies in one of the deep pools of the swamp. The chances were the murderer was still sleeping off the effects of drink somewhere in the tangled thorn thickets of the marsh.

Most of the searchers regarded Dolores Rell's melodramatic story with a great deal of skepticism. In the dim moonlight, they pointed out, a frenzied, wild-eyed tramp bent on imminent murder might very well have resembled some kind of monster. And the girl's hysteria had probably magnified what she had seen.

As night closed over the dismal morass, Chief Underbeck reluctantly suspended the hunt. In view of the fact that the murderer probably still lurked in the woods however, he decided to establish a system of night-long patrols along the highway which paralleled the swamp. If the quarry lay hidden in the treacherous tangle of trees and brush, he would not be able to escape onto the highway without running into one of the patrols. The only other means of egress from the swamp lay miles across the mire where the open sea washed against a reedy beach. And it was quite unlikely that the fugitive would even attempt escape in that direction.

The patrols were established in three-hour shifts, two men to a patrol, both heavily armed and both equipped with powerful searchlights. They were ordered to investigate every sound or movement which they detected in the brush bordering the highway. After a single command to halt, they were to shoot to kill. Any curious motorists who stopped to inquire about the hunt were to be swiftly waved on their way, after being warned not to give rides to anyone and to report all hitchhikers.

Fred Storr and Luke Matson, on the midnight to three o'clock patrol, passed an uneventful two hours on their particular stretch of the highway. Matson finally sat down on a fallen tree stump a few yards from the edge of the road.

"Legs givin' out," he commented wryly, resting his rifle on the stump. "Might as well sit a few minutes."

Fred Storr lingered nearby. "Guess so,

Luke. Don't look like—" Suddenly he scowled into the black fringes of the swamp. "You hear something, Luke?"

Luke listened, twisting around on the stump. "Well, maybe," he said finally, "kind of a little scratchy sound like."

He got up, retrieving his rifle.

"Let's take a look," Fred suggested in a low voice. He stepped over the stump and Luke followed him toward the tangle of brush which marked the border of the swamp jungle.

Several yards further along they stopped again. The sound became more audible. It was a kind of slithering, scraping sound, such as might be produced by a heavy body dragging itself over uneven ground.

"Sounds like—a snake," Luke ventured. "A damn big snake!"

"We'll get a little closer," Fred whispered. "You be ready with that gun when I switch on my light!"

They moved ahead a few more yards. Then a powerful yellow ray stabbed into the thickets ahead as Fred switched on his flashlight. The ray searched the darkness, probing in one direction and then another.

Luke lowered his rifle a little, frowning. "Don't see a thing," he said. "Nothing but a big pool of black scum up ahead there."

Before Fred had time to reply, the pool of black scum reared up into horrible life. In one hideous second it hunched itself into an unspeakable glistening hood and rolled forward with fearful speed.

Luke Matson screamed and fired simultaneously as the monstrous scarf of slime shot forward. A moment later it swayed above him. He fired again and the thing fell upon him.

In avoiding the initial rush of the horror, Fred Storr lost his footing. He fell headlong—and turned just in time to witness a sight which slowed the blood in his veins.

The monster had pounced upon Luke Matson. Now, as Fred watched, literally paralyzed with horror, it spread itself over and around the form of Luke until he was completely enveloped. The faint writhing of his limbs could still be seen. Then the thing squeezed, swelling into a hood and flattening itself again, and the writhing ceased.

As the thing lifted and swung forward in his direction, Fred Storr, goaded by frantic fear, overcame the paralysis of horror which had frozen him.

Grabbing the rifle which had fallen beside him, he aimed it at the shape of living slime and started firing. Pure terror possessed him as he saw that the shots were having no effect. The thing lunged toward him, to all visible appearances entirely oblivious to the rifle slugs tearing into its loathsome viscid mass.

Acting out of some instinct which he himself could not have named, Fred Storr dropped the rifle and seized his flashlight, playing its powerful beam directly upon the onrushing horror.

The thing stopped, scant feet away, and appeared to hesitate. It slid quickly aside at an angle, but he followed it immediately with the cone of light. It backed up finally and flattened out, as if trying by that means to avoid the light, but he trained the beam on it steadily, sensing with every primitive fiber which he possessed that the yellow shaft of light was the one thing which held off hideous death.

Now there were shouts in the nearby darkness and other lights began stabbing the shadows. Members of the adjacent patrols, alarmed by the sound of rifle fire, had come running to investigate.

Suddenly the nameless horror squirmed quickly out of the flashlight's beam and rushed away in the darkness.

IN THE leaden light of early dawn Chief Underbeck climbed into a police car waiting on the highway near Wharton's Swamp and headed back for Clinton Center. He had made a decision and he was grimly determined to act on it at once.

When he reached Headquarters, he made two telephone calls in quick succession, one to the governor of the state and the other to the commander of the nearby Camp Evans Military Reservation.

The horror in Wharton's Swamp—he had decided—could not be coped with by the limited men and resources at his command.

Rupert Barnaby, Jason Bukmeist and Luke Matson had without any doubt vanished in the swamp. The anonymous tramp, it now began to appear, far from being

the murderer, had been only one more victim. And Fred Storr—well, he hadn't disappeared. But the other patrol members had found him sitting on the ground near the edge of the swamp in the clutches of a mind-warping fear which had, temporarily at least, reduced him to near idiocy. Hours after he had been taken home and put to bed, he had refused to loosen his grip on a flashlight which he squeezed in one hand. When they switched the flashlight off, he screamed, and they had to switch it on again. His story was so wildly melodramatic it could scarcely be accepted by rational minds. And yet—they had said the same things about Dolores Rell's hysterical account. And Fred Storr was no excitable young girl; he had a reputation for level-headedness, stolidity and verbal honesty which was touched with understatement rather than exaggeration. As Chief Underbeck arose and walked out to his car in order to start back to Wharton's Swamp, he noticed Old Man Gowse coming down the block.

With a sudden thrill of horror he remembered the eccentric's missing cow. Before the old man came abreast however, he slammed the car door and issued crisp directions to the waiting driver. As the car sped away, he glanced in the rear-view mirror.

Old Man Gowse stood grimly motionless on the walk in front of Police Headquarters.

"Old Man Cassandra," Chief Underbeck muttered. The driver shot a swift glance at him and stepped on the gas.

Less than two hours after Chief Underbeck arrived back at Wharton's Swamp, the adjacent highway was crowded with cars—state police patrol cars, cars of the local curious, and Army trucks from Camp Evans.

Promptly at nine o'clock over three hundred soldiers, police and citizen volunteers, all armed, swung into the swamp to begin a careful search.

SHORTLY before dusk most of them had arrived at the sea on the far side of the swamp. Their exhaustive efforts had netted nothing. One soldier, noticing fierce eyes glaring out of a tree, had bagged an owl, and one of the state policemen had flushed a young bobcat. Someone else had stepped on a copperhead and been treated—successfully—for snakebite. But there was no sign of a monster, a murderous tramp, nor any of the missing men.

In the face of mounting skepticism however, Chief Underbeck stood firm. Pointing out that so far as they knew to date the murderer had prowled only at night, he ordered that after a four-hour rest and meal period the search should continue.

A number of helicopters which had hovered over the area during the afternoon landed on the strip of shore, bringing food and supplies. At Chief Underbeck's insistence, barriers were set up on the beach. Guards were stationed along the entire length of the highway: powerful searchlights were brought up. Another truck from Camp Evans arrived with a portable machine-gun and several flame-throwers.

In spite of the day's fruitless search, Chief Underbeck was convinced that the monster still lurked somewhere in the swamp. There were dense thickets and all but impassable scrub jungle stretches which even three hundred men could not scour thoroughly in a single day.

By eleven o'clock that night the stage was set. The beach barriers were in place, guards were at station, and huge searchlights, erected near the highway, swept the dismal marsh with probing cones of light.

At eleven-fifteen the night patrols, each consisting of ten strongly-armed men, struck into the swamp again.

RAVENOUS with hunger, the hood of horror reared out of the mud at the bottom of a rancid pool and rose toward the surface. Flopping ashore in the darkness, it slid quickly away over the clumps of scattered swamp grass. It was impelled, as always, by a savage and enormous hunger.

Although hunting in its new environment had been good, its immense appetite knew no appeasement. The more food it consumed, the more it appeared to require.

As it rushed off, alert to the minute vibrations which indicated food, it became aware of various disturbing emanations. Although it was the time of darkness in this strange world, the darkness at this usual hunting period was oddly pierced by the monster's hated enemy—light. The food

vibrations were stronger than the shape of slime had ever experienced. They were on all sides, powerful, purposeful, moving in many directions all through the lower layers of puzzling, light-riven darkness.

Lifting out of the ooze, the hood of horror flowed up a lattice-work of gnarled swamp snags and hung motionless, while drops of muddy water rolled off its glistening surface and dripped below. The thing's sensory apparatus told it that the maddening streaks of lack of darkness were everywhere.

Even as it hung suspended on the snags like a great filthy carpet coated with slime, a terrible touch of light slashed through the surrounding darkness and burned against it.

It immediately loosened its hold on the snags and fell back into the ooze with a mighty *plop*. Nearby, the vibrations suddenly increased in intensity. The maddening streamers of light shot through the darkness on all sides.

Baffled and savage, the thing plunged into the ooze and propelled itself in the opposite direction.

But this proved to be only a temporary respite. The vibrations redoubled in intensity. The darkness almost disappeared, riven and pierced by bolts and rivers of light.

For the first time in its incalculable existence, the thing experienced something vaguely akin to fear. The light could not be snatched up and squeezed and smothered to death. It was an alien enemy against which the hood of horror had learned only one defense—flight, hiding.

And now as its world of darkness was torn apart by sudden floods and streamers of light, the monster instinctively sought the refuge afforded by that vast black cradle from which it had climbed.

Flinging itself through the swamp, it headed back for sea.

THE guard patrols stationed along the beach, roused by the sound of gunfire and urgent shouts of warning from the interior of the swamp, stood or knelt with ready weapons as the clamor swiftly approached the sea.

The dismal reedy beach lay fully exposed in the harsh glare of searchlights. Waves rolled in toward shore, splashing white crests of foam far up the sands. In the searchlights' illumination the dark waters glistened with an oily iridescence.

The shrill cries increased. The watchers tensed, waiting. And suddenly across the long dreary flats clotted with weed stalks and sunken drifts there burst into view a nightmare shape which froze the shore patrols in their tracks.

A thing of slimy blackness, a thing which had no essential shape, no discernible earthly features, rushed through the thorn thickets and onto the flats. It was a shape of utter darkness, one second a great flapping hood, the next a black viscid pool of living ooze which flowed upon itself, sliding forward with incredible speed.

Some of the guards remained rooted where they stood, too overcome with horror to pull the triggers of their weapons. Others broke the spell of terror and began firing. Bullets from half a dozen rifles tore into the black monster speeding across the mud flats.

As the thing neared the end of the flats and approached the first sand dunes of the open beach, the patrol guards who had flushed it from the swamp broke into the open.

One of them paused, bellowing at the beach guards. "It's heading for sea! For God's sake don't let it escape!"

The beach guards redoubled their firing, suddenly realizing with a kind of sick horror that the monster was apparently unaffected by the rifle slugs. Without a single pause, it rolled through the last fringe of cattails and flopped onto the sands.

As in a hideous nightmare, the guards saw it flap over the nearest dune and slide toward the sea. A moment later however, they remembered the barbed wire beach barrier which Chief Underbeck had stubbornly insisted on their erecting.

Gaining heart, they closed in, running over the dunes toward the spot where the black horror would strike the wire.

Someone in the lead yelled in sudden triumph. "It's caught! It's stuck on the wire!"

The searchlights concentrated swaths of light on the barrier.

The thing had reached the barbed wire fence and apparently flung itself against the twisted strands. Now it appeared to be hopelessly caught; it twisted and flopped and squirmed like some unspeakable giant jellyfish snared in a fisherman's net.

The guards ran forward, sure of their victory. All at once however, the guard in the lead screamed a wild warning. "It's squeezing through! It's getting away!"

In the glare of light they saw with consternation that the monster appeared to be *flowing* through the wire, like a blob of liquescent ooze.

Ahead lay a few yards of downward slanting beach and, beyond that, rolling breakers of the open sea.

THERE was a collective gasp of horrified dismay as the monster, with a quick forward lurch, squeezed through onto the other side of the barrier. It tilted there briefly, twisting, as if a few last threads of itself might still be entangled in the wire.

As it moved to disengage itself and rush down the wet sands into the black sea, one of the guards hurled himself forward until he was almost abreast of the barrier. Sliding to his knees, he aimed something at the escaping hood of horror.

A second later a great searing spout of flame shot from his weapon and burst in a smoky red blossom against the thing on the opposite side of the wire.

Black oily smoke billowed into the night. A ghastly stench flowed over the beach. The guards saw a flaming mass of horror grope away from the barrier. The soldier who aimed the flamethrower held it remorselessly steady however.

There was a hideous bubbling, hissing sound. Vast gouts of thick, greasy smoke swirled into the night air. The indescribable stench became almost unbearable.

When the soldier finally shut off the flamethrower, there was nothing in sight except the white-hot glowing wires of the barrier and a big patch of blackened sand.

With good reason the mantle of slime had hated light, for its ultimate source was fire—the final unknown enemy which even the black hood could not drag down and devour.

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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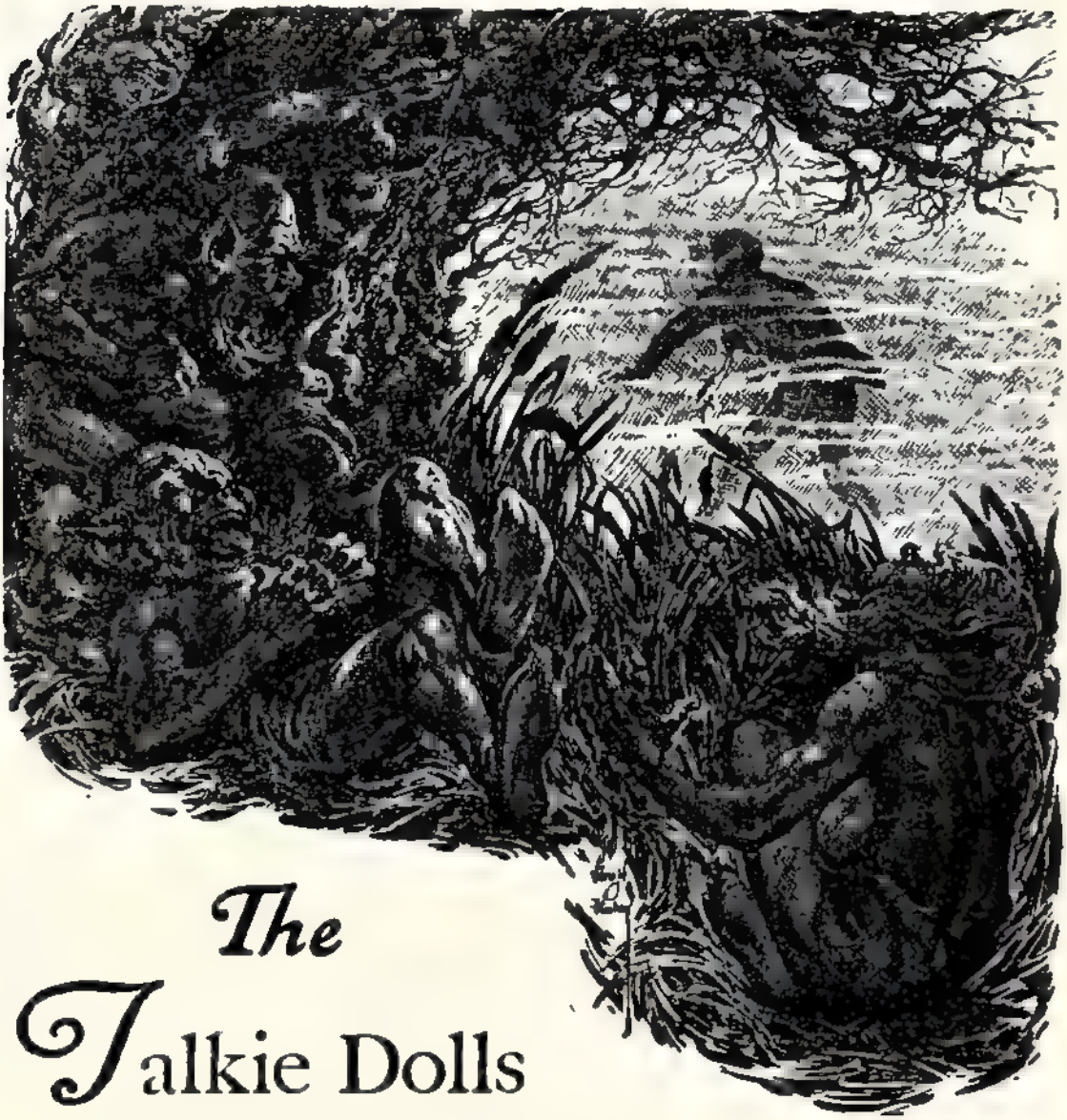

The Talkie Dolls

BY DONALD F. VIEWEG

I SHIVERED uneasily as I drove into the swirling mists rolling high like ocean waves as the headlights knifed into them. I knew I was lost now. I had my doubts before, but now—after hours of crawling through the snaking road and encountering the most dismal, eerie landscape I had ever seen—now I knew.

The map said Crocus Swamp. But where in Crocus Swamp was I? And what kind of a fool was I to take the shortcut? Salesman, phooey! Don't get me wrong; I like my selling job. But I don't like all the traveling necessary to being a salesman. Sometimes I don't like the things it forces me to do—like threatening old couples who have done nothing to me. That's company policy. First you politely remind them of due payment, then you become insistent and

Heading by Virgil Finlay

finally you threaten court action. I wasn't built to threaten people. It bothered my sleep.

I was seriously thinking of giving the job up. And now, after being lost in this confounded swamp for over four hours, I was sure of giving it up—if I ever got back to civilization.

I drove on. Surely this winding dirt road led back to the highway. I was almost afraid to look to the left or right of the headlights. The giant willow trees on the shore hovered over the dank, still waters of the swamp like straggly-haired witches over a boiling cauldron in *Macbeth*. "Bubble, bubble. Toil and trouble." On the breath of the winds I heard the incantations.

The night noises made me nervous. What was it about a swamp at full moon that amplified harmless sounds into screeching, terrifying voices? Imagination helps, perhaps, but all I knew was I didn't like it. This place foretold of death. It smelled of rot and filth; the very air was heavy with it.

After countless miles of twisting road, the headlights of my car caught a small clearing. I breathed a sigh of relief. A clearing meant a house. Perhaps I could get directions.

I left the car in the road and half-stumbled toward the outline on the hill. Sharp, wide-bladed grasses tore at my trousers, as though warning me to stop, to turn back. More than once I paused to look behind me. Crushed sticks underfoot snapped in warning.

IT WAS too dark to see clearly, but I could make out an old fashioned log cabin huddled between two giant pines, their peaks whistling in the wind above. The cabin was almost crushed by gaunt roots of wisteria, gnarled and interwoven like a web. Two small windowboxes, unpainted, were fastened beneath the low windows.

I stepped on to a flagstone walk overrun with grass and budding flowers. My heels clicked as I walked. My breath came labored. My throat burned as I drew gasps of warm air into my lungs. The early mosquitoes and insects were having a picnic.

Why anyone in his right mind would live in such a place I'd never know.

I knocked on the old Dutch doors. Silence. I knocked again, this time harder. I saw a light flare up inside and heard a thin voice call out. I waited.

After a dozen more mosquitoes had needled my face and hands, the upper portion of the Dutch doors opened and I saw a little old man in nightcap and gown fresh out of Dickens. He was holding a kerosene lamp before him. He was as twisted and gnarled as the wisteria on his house.

He grinned at me and his round eyes reflected bright in the light. I stared at them. They were soft eyes, friendly, humorous. The little man made me smile in spite of my situation and the confounded mosquitoes.

"Forgive me for bothering you, old man," I said. "I took what I thought was a short cut and got lost. I wonder if you—"

The old man laughed, a pleasant, bell-like chuckle. He made me feel foolish. I couldn't help but join in.

"I know it's silly, but it's true. I've been driving for hours."

"Ye got lost. Hee Hee."

"I wanted directions. Would you—"

"Come in, my boy. Leave ye contraption at the post."

How could such tired eyes see my car? The lights were off and the car was a good hundred feet below into the night. "Thank you," I said.

He opened the door for me and I had to stoop to enter. The doorway was only four or five feet high. The old man lit two more lamps and I could really see him.

I had never seen a human being so old. He was ancient, dried and shriveled to the bone. His face was wrinkled into a perpetual smile and his eyes, I saw now, were still smiling.

"Sit ye down, young man. Please do." He turned. "Inex," he called in a soft, piping voice. "Come on out. Ye have company."

I looked at the doorway to what I thought was the bedroom. The old woman who entered was as ancient and emaciated by time as he. Her white hair was rolled in a tight bun on the top of her head. A few whisps straggled over her ears and down her neck. She wore a flannel nightgown buttoned up to her throat and walked with a bent stick

for a cane. She was badly stooped, like the old man, but if she straightened up, she wouldn't have been more than four feet tall. She glanced up at me and grinned welcome showing her toothless gums.

"Howdie ye do."

I stood up and bowed. Somehow she commanded that bow. For all her diminutive height, she moved with dignity. And yet she was no bigger than my four-year old daughter Shirley.

"Sit ye down," the old lady admonished, a scowl wrinkling her face. She hobbled over to the old man and waved her stick. "Ab, did ye ferget ye manners? Pour some mead for the young gentl'man."

"Don't bother," I said. "Please. I only want to get directions."

"Now, ye keep sitting. Ab, the mead."

I cautiously eased back into the tiny chair. I was afraid my weight would break it. None of the furniture was built for a two-hundred pound man.

The old man brought mugs and a bottle. It was green, but of a rough, hand-made variety, more like a potter's vase. Ab poured the thick liquid into the three mugs and the old lady nodded approval. She sat beside the old man and motioned to me to drink. It was sweet and syrupy. I had never had mead before, but this stuff was good. And it was strong. I drained the mug and placed it back on the table. The old lady hadn't touched hers, but the old man was loudly smacking his lips in obvious enjoyment.

"It be too late for me," the old lady said as she noticed my glance. "Ye said ye be lost?"

"Yes. I took this road because the map indicated it would save twenty miles. But I must have driven thirty already. Probably more. My wife will be worried. I'm a salesman, you see, and—"

"Ah. Ye have a wife?"

"Yes, and a four-year old daughter." I reached for my wallet. "Here's their pictures." I was proud of Peg and little Shirley. They were the best things I had ever done. Marrying Peg had changed my life. I became serious and worked hard and now we had a new car and little Shirley and almost eight-hundred in the bank toward our new house. Yes, meeting Peg was the best thing that ever happened to me.

"My, they be a pretty brood," the old lady said. "And the little 'un a tow-head like yerself."

The old man looked at the photograph and pursed his lips. He nodded approval, then took his seat in the shadows.

"And what might ye be called by?" the old lady said.

"Called by? Oh—my name is Peter Bordon. That's Peg there," I said pointing to her picture. And the little one is Shirley."

"Ah, yes. A pretty brood." The old lady scowled at her husband who was dosing. "That one there be called Ab and I be Inex Talkie."

"Mr. and Mrs. Talkie," I repeated. I took her shriveled hand in mine. It felt like a feather. "I'm glad to meet you."

"And I. And sleepy Ab there."

AS WE talked, I began to grow drowsy. My eyelids seemed to be weighted by lead. I yawned. I shook my head. The old lady pushed another cup of mead into my hand and I drank it down. It was late, very late. Peg would be worried. I got up.

"Excuse me. I've got to get something from the car."

The old lady smiled and the old man snorted in his sleep. I stooped under the doorway and the warm air hit me like a fist. The bugs and mosquitoes attacked as I ran down the flagstone walk into the tall grass at the foot of the hill. Above the wind moaned feebly.

It was only a pretext, I had to get out of there; I was falling asleep. That mead was like a drug. But I had told Mrs. Talkie I had to get something from the car. What? A couple of pots and pans. I had plenty unsold. Besides, the old people were friendly and sociable. They certainly could use some new aluminum pans with copper bottoms. Probably never seen them before.

I found a good sauce pan and a ten-inch fryer in the trunk, then closed and locked it. The bugs were driving me crazy. I was wide awake now.

I ran through the knife-edge grass to the walk and hurried back into the little house. Mr. Talkie was awake and grinning. His

wife had something in her gnarled hands. She was stroking it.

"Here," I said. I placed the pans on the table. "These are for you. I appreciate your fine hospitality."

The old lady picked up the pans, looked at them, turned them over, rubbed her brittle fingers along the polished aluminum and smiled. She seemed pleased.

"That be a fine skillet," the old man said.

I smiled. It had pleased them and I felt good inside. Besides, the pans cost me only a buck or so wholesale. "I'm glad you like them," but now I must be going. Could you tell me which is the main road?"

The old man pointed. "Go down the road a piece. At the fork, take ye right. God be with ye, young 'un."

The old couple seemed reluctant to have me go. They were probably starved for company. I guessed I was the first person they had seen in months. But I had to get home to Peg. She'd be worried silly.

I took the old lady's hand in my own. It was white as chalk, the veins bulging and blue. She stood up.

"Ye been kind," she said, her eyes sharp and bright. "And we be glad for ye company. Ye skillet and pot we will use." She looked at the thing in her other hand. "We have something fer ye."

I shook my head. That wasn't necessary. But the old lady seemed so disappointed, I agreed. "Thank you," I said as she pushed her gift into my hand. It felt peculiar, almost alive. I looked at it in the wavering light of the kerosene lamps.

It was two puppets with strings, crossbar and all. I had never seen such superior workmanship. The limbs were superbly formed. The joints at the knees and elbows were barely discernible. They looked like breathing miniature human beings.

"Shirley will love these," I said.

The old lady's manner darkened like a storm cloud. "No! No!" she cried shrilly. Her wizened face contorted almost hideously. "They be not for children! They be for you and Peeg. They be your fortune. Look at them."

I brought them closer to the lamp. One was male, the other, female. One had long black hair—like Peg's, and the other had short, blonde hair like mine. And their faces! I stared, dumbfounded, at the old lady. How did she do it?

Then I saw my billfold on the table beside the smoking kerosene lamp and I knew. The photograph of Peg and myself was beside it. In the short time I had visited the car, the old lady had somehow molded Peg's and my resemblance on the faces of the dolls. The similarity was unnerving. Peg's delicate features were captured in putty and paste. Her doll was as lovely as she.

"They—They're very beautiful," I said almost whispering. "I don't know how you did it, but they're wonderful." I wanted to throw the puppets down; their striking similarity frightened me.

"They be yer fortune," old Mrs. Talkie repeated. "The Talkie Dolls never fail."

I didn't believe much in luck charms except in my St. Christopher medal around my neck, but I didn't want to hurt the old couples' feelings.

"And how might that come about?"

The old lady cackled to herself. "Ye will see. Show them to ye wife. Ye both will see. But do not give them to the little 'un. Heed me now." She cackled again, this time loud and echoing.

I thanked Mr. and Mrs. Talkie for their hospitality and directions and bade them goodbye. They bowed politely stiff from the waist and closed the door on me. The insects did not attack.

As I turned to go down the flagstone walk I thought I heard the most fiendish shrill cackling from inside the old cabin. I hurried to the car with the two puppets clutched tight in my hand. I laid them on the seat beside me and started the car. The lights sliced into the mists, outlining the dirt road ahead.

I drove about five-hundred feet, found the fork and was again on the main highway, none the worse for my experience. Only the trip-hammer beat of my heart belied that.

PEG leaned up on her elbow, her gown falling away to reveal the clean, white line of her throat. She looked so beautiful there. Her big brown eyes were wide and

bright and curious. She smiled in obvious relief when I kissed her. I sat on the bed and she took my hand in hers.

"What kept you so long, Pete?"

As I told her what happened, she listened with her full lips parted slightly in that expectant, appealing way I had always loved. She squealed in girlish delight when I showed her the two puppets.

"The old couple *gave* them to you? Why, these dolls must be very old. They're lovely."

I agreed with both her statements. "Look at their faces," I said.

Peg first picked up the male doll. (Just like a woman). She stroked its blonde hair and touched its slightly pug nose. "Why—It—It looks just like you!"

I handed her the second doll. "Look at this one."

Peg did, and her mouth widened in surprise. "It's me! But how—?"

"The old lady molded the features from the photograph while I was at the car. I don't know how she did it so fast."

Peg held the dolls in her hands. She looked from one to the other. She turned to me. "Do you think it's really true? I mean about these dolls bringing good fortune?"

"I don't feel any richer yet," I joked. I undressed, put on my pajamas and crawled into bed beside Peg. She gave the dolls a final look before placing them on the magazine she had been reading. She reached over and turned out the light.

Night filled the room. Far in the east dawn crept up over the rim of the world. The faint light caught Peg's delicate features, outlining them. Her full lips glistened.

I leaned on my elbow and kissed her cheek. "I've got my fortune beside me," I said.

Peg cuddled closer to me. "Good morning, darling," she said sleepily.

IT WAS funny, but I was wide awake. The night's adventures had stimulated my imagination so my thoughts tumbled like a dried weed in the wind. Could it be true? Was it possible that two inanimate dolls could bring our fortune? Faugh! The idea was ridiculous. I rolled over. The morning's gold caught the faces of the dolls on the table beside the bed. They seemed to be laughing at me.

Shirley woke us a few hours later. Saturday. No school. Saturday, the gang of kids across the yard. Shirley wanted to go out and play.

Bleary-eyed, I ate breakfast across from Peg and Shirley. They both seemed to sparkle, but I felt like a limp rag. Too much thinking about the dolls and old Mr. and Mrs. Talkie. I was glad I had made my sales quota and didn't have to go out. I needed an afternoon nap.

The harsh jangle of the telephone startled me. Peg, followed closely by Shirley, ran to answer it. "What? No, you must have the wrong Bordons."

The high-pitched voice on the other end of the line seemed insistent.

"But I tell you we didn't take any chance on a house!"

"What is it, Peg?" I called to her.

"Oh, this man—Here Pete, you talk to him. He says we won a model home. He's crazy."

I picked up the phone and the voice confirmed Peg's statement: we did win a model home. The drawing occurred last night. Mr. and Mrs. Peter A. Bordon of 112 Cedar Avenue were the winners. That was Peg and I, but neither of us ever heard of the house or took a chance on the drawing.

Nevertheless, the voice went on, we won the house. Details would be forwarded later.

I dropped the phone into its cradle. This was crazy. It was fantastic! I had never won anything before in my life and now I suddenly won a whole model home on a drawing with a ticket I had never purchased. I fell into the chair beside the phone. My head was spinning. Peg was laughing.

"It was a good joke, Sporty. Now call up your friend and tell him I'm wise."

"But it isn't a gag. I had nothing to do with it. Honest, Peg."

Now it was Peg's time to fall into a chair. She ran her slim hand over her brow. She shook her head. "Are—Are you sure?"

"Positive. I wouldn't lie about anything so serious."

Peg got up and walked about the room.

She seemed like she didn't know what to do. Finally she disappeared into the bedroom. Shirley went out to play.

"Pete!" Peg called shrilly. "Pete, come quick!"

I ran into the bedroom. Peg was standing beside the bed, her eyes wide and staring at the two dolls on the table.

"Pete. The dolls are lying on the magazine I was reading last night. Look at the picture they're on!"

I moved the puppets aside. They felt warm. My pulse quickened. The cover picture of the magazine was of the Kent County Model Home. Drawing for the house was last night's date. It was sponsored by the VFW, Kent County Division.

Peg gasped. "The dolls were resting on the picture of the house. We won the house. Oh, Pete, the old couple was right! The dolls *will* make our fortune!"

I couldn't believe it. There was too much coincidence there. It *had* to be coincidence. As though in the light winds outside, I heard the shrill cackle of two laughing voices. No, I wouldn't believe it!

I rummaged through my billfold. The stub had to be there. Somewhere, some time back, I must have purchased at least one ticket for the drawing. I must have.

Finally I found it tucked in with my personal papers. One ticket for the drawing. I couldn't remember when and where I had bought it, but it wasn't important. I had it.

I laughed, the knot of tension suddenly released in my stomach.

Peg was watching me.

"Here's your sudden good fortune," I said. I showed her the ticket stub.

She was visibly relieved and I must say I couldn't blame her. Again she studied the two puppets. She danced the male one that resembled me by its strings. I watched her curiously, my blood suddenly rushing through my veins. My head was spinning. I was panting for breath.

"Stop it, Peg! Stop it!"

Peg seemed indignant at the tone of my voice. She was puzzled. I didn't know why, but when she laid the male doll down, I felt better.

"This proves Wildroot Cream-Oil keeps hair well groomed even if you have cowlicks!"

"He keeps his Wildroot Cream-Oil there because it's his hair's best friend"

"Since using Wildroot Cream-Oil I look twice as good!"

YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND

America's Favorite Hair Tonic!

Oh, brother, was I getting sour. I needed a vacation. My imagination was turning full blast.

PRESENTLY Peg smiled in her warm way that made everything seem right. I grinned back, chagrined. I felt like a nut.

"Shall we try our luck," I said. "Let's find out once and for all. Now, Hon, what would you like most?"

Peg caught on to the game. She sat down and deliberated, her index finger to her mouth which was pleasantly pursed. "Well, now. I really don't know. I could do with a new model husband— Or maybe a secret lover like Gregory Peck. I know—" she said suddenly, giggling. "I'd like two big spruce trees in the yard a hammock's distance apart."

"Are you kidding? Where would spruce trees fit in this city background?"

Peg shrugged. "That's the problems of the dolls." She peeked through the parlor windows. "Nope. No trees yet."

"Maybe we're supposed to place the dolls on a picture like the house we won," I said. I flipped the pages of her *Better Homes and Gardens*. "Ah, here's two spruces."

Peg found the scissors and like two happy children we sat on the floor and cut out the trees. We didn't want the rest of the forest in our rented back yard. We placed the spruces a few inches apart, estimating proportionally what would be the correct distance for one hammock.

Peg brought the dolls from the table by the bed and dangled them over the two trees. "Shall I whisper the magic words?"

We laughed and she gently placed the dolls over the spruce trees. Nothing happened. Peg pulled herself to her feet.

"Well; enough of this. Put the dolls away They're too lovely for Shirley to play with." She went into her kitchen.

From my position on the parlor floor I thought I heard a gurgle. Then I heard coughing followed by a scream which brought me instantly to my feet. I ran into the kitchen.

"Peg! Darling, what's wrong?"

She was as white as the dish towel in her hands. She was trembling so she could barely stand. "L—Look out the window!"

I parted the curtains and knew I was crazy. Rising out of the solid cement walk on the front lawn were two huge spruce trees.

Peg whimpered behind me. She held on to my arm for support. "Are they really there?"

"Yes," I said, swallowing. "Sprouted right up through the cement. Brother, will Vincent raise hell."

"He'll kick us out, that's what," Peg wailed. "He won't let us grow two spruce trees in his yard, and right in the path."

It was hardly appropriate at the time, but we both sat down and laughed like fools. Imagine the face of the landlord when he saw two giant spruce trees blocking the walk of his house.

But it was true; the Talkie Dolls would bring our fortune. When we calmed down, we tried it again, only this time we placed the dolls on a tempting roast turkey in the recipe section of the book. We found the turkey a few minutes later in the oven. It was still hot.

WE GOT a best seller the same way, a jar of cream guaranteed to develop the feminine bust, although why Peg wanted that stuff I'll never know. I got that Benrus watch with the expansion bracelet I always wanted.

We were having a wonderful time with the dolls. Our parlor and kitchen were littered with the stuff.

We didn't care where it came from; all we knew was that the Talkie Dolls brought it almost immediately. We could have anything! We could do anything. It was wonderful!

Finally we tired of the tricks of the dolls. Even having your every wish granted could get fatiguing, I know! We put the dolls carefully away and prepared supper. Poor Shirley was starved.

"Why prepare supper?" Peg said. "Let's order it up." She turned the pages of another of her household books until she came to a mouth-watering picture in color of baked chops casserole. I went after the dolls.

Shirley watched wide-eyed in fascina-

tion. Her mouth was open and her pink tongue showed between her lips.

"Is it a game, Daddy?" she asked.

"Yes. A wonderful, delicious game," Peg sang out. She waltzed the Talkie Dolls around the room on their strings. I felt dizzy. Somewhere I heard soft, piping voices laughing.

"Come on, Peg," I called to her. "Hurry up."

Peg fell on the floor beside me. "Whew! I'm sick." She ran her hand over her smooth, white forehead. It was beaded with perspiration. But it wasn't very hot out.

I laid the dolls over the colored picture of the baked pork chop casserole and a few minutes later our supper was waiting on the stove. It was funny about the dolls. We never saw the thing we wanted materialize. It just appeared during an eye blink. Sometimes we were informed that we had such an item over the phone like the model home. Once we received a telegram confirming one week's vacation at an expensive resort—all expenses paid. It was an advertising gift from the management.

Again I wondered where the dolls got their gifts. If they stole them then Peg and I could be accused of theft. They certainly couldn't manufacture them out of nothing. Nothing equalled nothing, and we had real, substantial items filling our parlor and kitchen.

"Let me do it," Shirley begged.

Peg, suddenly aroused from silence, seized the dolls from my hands. "No! Don't you ever touch them, young lady. If you do you'll get a good lacing!"

I was surprised by her behavior. She wasn't like that. She noticed my stare and blushed.

"I—It's not what you think," she said, her voice husky in her throat. "I—I'm scared. Honest, Pete. This isn't natural. I was thinking: What—would—happen—if—the dolls were—rested on fire, or placed in the path of a speeding car? What would happen to us if someone accidentally placed them on a picture—of the ocean?"

I felt my breath involuntarily draw in to fill my lungs. I exhaled in a painful cough. "I hadn't thought of that," I said.

If the dolls were placed on a picture of the ocean, they would bring the boiling ocean down upon us. We'd drown! I shuddered. The ways of possible instant death were terrifying.

"I—I guess maybe I better return them," I said. "Tomorrow. First we'll get all the things we always wanted."

"No, Pete," Peg said, her lower lip quivering. "I'm afraid. Something awful will happen. People don't get things free. They've got to pay. Somehow they've got to pay."

"Peg, No." I didn't like that kind of talk. "The dolls were given in good faith," I said. "They were a gift. I'll return them tomorrow, honest."

"I'm afraid," Peg said in a whisper. She hugged herself. "I'm cold. It isn't right, Pete. Please return them."

I moved over to comfort Peg. She was sobbing now and her beautiful face was very white. As I eased my hand about her trembling shoulders, I suddenly winced in pain. Peg, under my hand, stiffened and screamed.

"My leg! Pete, my leg! Stop it. Make it stop!"

My eyes were blurred by my own tears, but I saw Shirley. She had the dolls by their strings, jumping them up and down and swinging them around. I cried out in panic.

"Stop it, Shirley. For God's sake, stop it!"

Shirley looked at me. Her gentle eyes filled with tears which rolled down her cheeks. "I was only dancin' them, Daddy," she said.

She dropped the Talkie Dolls to the floor and ran to her mother who was still moaning. "I didn't mean nothin', Mommie."

Even though Peg was in great pain, she forced herself to smile and comfort the child. She rubbed her bruised and swollen leg. Her nylon stockings were ripped and blood smeared at the knee. "Please take the dolls back," she begged. "Please, Pete. They're evil! Return them to their owners."

SHE was right; that was the only sensible thing I could do. The evil in the dolls destroyed the good. As soon as I was sure Peg's leg was properly treated and Shirley was safely in bed, I gently eased the two

puppets on the front seat of my car and left for the rot and filth of Crocus Swamp.

The day's full sun was round and red in the west. Blue-gray shadows crawled across the highway as I drove. I thought of the day's events: Could such weird occurrences really have happened? I glanced at my new Benrus watch on my wrist. It sparkled in the dim light of the dash and the hands told the correct time. This was real; I saw it; I felt its warmth against my skin. It was ticking.

I TURNED off the main road into the back route to Crocus Swamp. The foul air of the place filled my nostrils, making me sneeze repeatedly. The fork in the road was a short distance in. I drove on.

In the gray of dusk I saw the clearing ahead just as I had remembered it. The two huge pines were at the top of the hill. I strained to see ahead in the dim light, but there was no cabin!

No cabin? There had to be a cabin! I jammed on the brakes and pulled up the emergency. I ran from the car. The full moon leered like a face above. I called out and stumbled through the clutching grasses up the hill. Where was the overgrown flagstone walk?

It was gone. Everything was gone. I stood between the two humming pines and gazed forlornly at the blood purple sky. "No. No," I cried. "This is wrong. This is all wrong!"

"What ya' looking for, stranger?"

I spun around. He was a farmer, an old, bent scarecrow of a man in faded blue denim with a fishpole over his shoulder.

"I saw ya' runnin' around. Ya' lose somethin'?"

"W—Where's the old cabin that was here?" I asked him.

"Old cabin?" The farmer scratched his head. He shifted his fishing pole over to his other shoulder. "There ain't ever been a cabin here, mister."

He was lying. Of course there was a cabin! "It was covered with old wisteria roots," I said. "It had double doors. Two old people lived in it. I saw it just last night."

The farmer smiled, embarrassed. "Well, I been livin' in Crocus Swamp over fifty years an' I ain't never seen a cabin. Not in this place anyways. Nobody ever built here. Can't. It's for the little folk."

"T—the little folk?" I said.

"Now, I ain't never seen them. Grampa said when he tried to build here his house kept cavin' in. Finally had to move back a piece. Some folks 'round here say they seen the little folk on dark, lonely nights. I ain't. They say the little folks are full of fun. Always playin' jokes on strangers. That's who you must of seen.

"Well, hope ya' find ya' cabin, but I doubt it." The old farmer hefted his pole higher on his shoulder and walked into the shadows and was gone.

Crazy old man. I turned and ran down the hill. The grass ripped at my skin, tiny razors drawing blood. I tripped and rolled and cried out and swallowed bugs and mosquitoes. I beat the moist earth with my fists.

He was just making that up. Crazy old fool. Of course he was. Little folk, always playing jokes. "No!" I screamed bitterly into the night. "No! No!"

But I knew it *was* so. And it was a wonderful joke they played on Peg and me. But why us? Why? A wonderful joke. Oh, a superb joke!

I have the Talkie Dolls and I can't get rid of them. I can't hide them. I can't destroy them or they'll destroy us. What can I tell Peg? What can I do? I have the dolls! I have the Talkie Dolls!

From out of the twin pines swaying atop the hill I heard a voice laughing. I looked up and saw no one. A second, ancient, brittle voice joined it. And the night winds rose and carried the two piping, demonic voices of the little ones out over the coiling mists and rot of Crocus Swamp.

Heading by Jon Arfstrom

Having an option on a man's soul isn't quite the same as owning it. . . .

Caveat Emptor

BY L. SPRAGUE de CAMP and FLETCHER PRATT

MR. WITHERWAX, in a state that might be described as a low dudgeon, brandished his Martini in one hand. "I hope they send him up for a million years!" he said.

"Who?" said Mr. Gross, shaking raindrops from his hat, and motioning to the bartender for his usual boilermaker.

"Finley. The real estate agent. Wait till

you hear what he did. I told you I was moving, didn't I? Well, I took the day off to see to it, and got to the new place with the moving van about noon, and we were just beginning to get the stuff inside, when up comes another moving van with a lot of stuff belonging to a family named Schultz, from somewhere over on the East Side, and they want to get in the same place. They had keys, too. What do you think I found out?"

Mr. Cohan, who had finished serving a thin, sad-looking man farther down the bar, sidled over. "Don't be telling me, Mr. Witherwax, that Finley rented it to the both of you?"

"That's right," said Witherwax. "It's an awful mess; making us pay six months in advance because apartments are so hard to find. It'll be all right for me, because my lease is good on account of it's dated first, but we had to get this Schultz from his office and then the owner, and the moving men standing around on the sidewalk picking up overtime, and the stuff wasn't all in yet when I came away. I don't know what Schultz is going to do."

"What happened to Finley?" asked Gross.

"Skipped out. When they went to his office, they found he hadn't been there for two days. He's probably got half a dozen other suckers the same way. They're going over the books now."

Gross said, "That reminds me of my wife's uncle Cicero. He bought a lot of bronze for junk once, and then found it was part of the statue of Abraham Lincoln—"

"If they ever find him—" said Witherwax.

"They will," said the thin man in a surprisingly penetrating voice. Three heads turned to look at a hatchet-faced man with black hair and a thin black mustache sweeping back from his bead of a nose, not unlike Robert Louis Stevenson in his later, more tubercular years. "It's the seller they always find in these fraud cases. I only wish I could find the buyer."

"Why?" asked Witherwax.

The thin man smiled a wan smile. "Well, because it was I who committed the fraud—or tried to. I have reason to believe that it was committed on me instead. I think it was legitimate. I tried to defraud the Devil."

Mr. Cohan shrank back against the bar and hurriedly crossed himself. Gross exhibited a bovine placidity. Witherwax said, "The Devil, eh? How do you know it was the Devil?"

I don't (said the thin man). It was only *a* devil of some kind. And I didn't even see him—or it. I'm just sure. Mr. Bartender, I don't know your name, but please give these gentlemen a drink and put it on my check. I have to tell somebody about this, or—well, I have to tell somebody about this.

IT STARTED with my friend, Cal Haugen—that is, he used to be my friend—who became interested in medieval sorcery. I thought it was a lot of nonsense. Especially the books, which he said were grimoires, manuals of diabolism and magic. They claimed to be medieval, but he admitted to me once that most of them were printed during the 18th century and predated to bring higher prices. All the same, he treated them seriously and used to try out the formulas, drawing pentacles on the floor and making incantations. Used to say that the books were imperfect guides, but the only way to discover something was to follow what leads you had, then find out where they had taken you, like Henry Hudson trying to reach the Northwest Passage and finding Hudson River.

None of the formulas worked—at that time, anyway. I remember the night when we laid off experimenting to have a couple of drinks, and Cal remarked that it was a damn shame the infernal powers were so slow on the uptake. If one of them appeared, he'd be glad to sell off his soul, which was likely to be lost anyway, whereas he certainly could use some money.

He was kidding, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness about it that made me think he might really be hard up, and when I asked, he said, yes, he was. I could let him have a hundred and I told him so, but with the mood of our experiments still on us and, in a way, because we were both

a little embarrassed, I said I'd have to have an option on the purchase of his soul.

By that time we were down to the fourth or fifth drink. Cal pretended to treat the whole project with deadly seriousness; wrote out a memo all full of whereases and all the other legal-sounding hocus-pocus we could think of. In it, he agreed to sell me, Albert Conrad, one soul for five thousand dollars at any time within a month from date. We each signed it with a drop of blood. Then we had some coffee.

I hadn't drunk enough to make the coffee ineffective in keeping me awake, so I borrowed one of Cal's grimoires to read myself to sleep on. When I gave my attention to it, I thought I could see why the Devil, if there were a personage who could be summoned up to appear to fleshly eyes, took a dim view of the methods set forth in the grimoires. They were full of formulas for the sale of souls, but every one had an enormous joker in it somewhere, so the sorcerer who conducted the sale could escape at the last moment. You'd think that even a half-witted devil would spot it every time, but apparently the people who wrote the grimoires didn't believe that a demon would be one unless he were less than half-witted.

That didn't seem logical to me, and at first I thought of calling up Cal and telling him I'd discovered where he made his mistake. But it was late. The drinks and coffee had left me comfortable and a little bit tired and it was too much trouble to move. And as I sat there thinking about it, it occurred to me that I had in my pocket an option for a perfectly genuine soul-sale, with no trickery or intention of trickery about it. If I could somehow call up a devil, I could offer him a soul in all sincerity; not my soul, but I didn't suppose the Devil would be particular about that. The keynote of the whole business would be the one thing that grimoires missed, the genuineness of the offer. And after I collected from the Devil, I could pay Cal his five thousand.

THE whole thing was fantastic, so I laughed and went to bed. Next day I did call Cal and tell him why I thought the incantations were a failure. He was disposed to argue about it at first, but after a while said I might be right. If sincerity of purpose was a requirement for getting into the Church, or Heaven, it probably would be desired in the other department, too, and there wouldn't be much more use invoking the Devil without it than invoking the Holy Spirit.

(Mr. Cohan, who had moved as far away as he could without getting out of earshot, crossed himself again.)

The more I thought of it, the better my chances looked to achieve a position perhaps unique in human history—thanks to the agreement Cal had signed. Now I know perfectly well that the medieval alchemists and magicians were self-deluded even when they thoroughly believed in what they were doing, and their experiments were a tissue of absurdities. But it seemed to me that in the course of all the centuries they worked on it, they could hardly miss arriving at some few clues to the real thing. After all, the astrologers did found the science of astronomy. Besides, as Cal put it, the formulas in the grimoires were the only guide-posts there were. I had to follow them as far as they would lead.

You see, by this time I had already made up my mind to try it. It was a lot of trouble. The formula called for a magic sword, and I didn't have a sword of any kind, but I got a poker and worked away on it with a file and a sharpening stone until I achieved a fairly respectable point, and I thought maybe that would do. A sulphur fumigating candle supplied the brimstone; it smelled terrible and nearly choked me. I found I had to practice for hours with a brush before I could make even fairly good copies of the Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton.

BUT I assembled all the properties, and at midnight, as the grimoire advised, started my incantation. It's quite impressive, even when you translate it into English. I used the medieval Latin of the original, of course. I didn't want to vary the formula any more than I had to; and I kept in mind all the time that this was a perfectly genuine offer. And I succeeded.

(Gross emitted a prodigious belch: Mr.

Cohan almost dropped the bottle he was holding, and Witherwax' mouth fell open. "You mean you saw the Devil?" he asked incredulously. "Mr. Cohan, another round.")

No, I don't mean anything of the kind. I told you in the beginning I didn't actually see any devil. But I know I raised one. The lights in my pentacle took on a blueish cast that I simply haven't any means of accounting for. I found myself suddenly shivering all over, though the room was quite warm, and I had the most horrible sensation of depression and utter despair, as though everything in the world had failed and I had lost my last friend. The strangest part was—well, you know the feeling when you're reading, concentrating on the page, and someone looks over your shoulder? It was like that, only intensified a dozen times. I looked all round the room and even turned around two or three times. There was no one there, but I definitely felt someone in the room with me.

I thought that as long as I had gone this far I might as well carry on, so I said, "I offer you the soul of Calistus Haugen in exchange for money—lots of money."

I don't know what I expected to happen, but nothing did except that the lights gave a slight flicker. Not a sound; nothing to see. If it hadn't been for that feeling of *presence* and the awful depression, I would have said this was quite as much a failure as Cal's own experiments. But I remembered the bargain had to be sealed, so I wrote out another contract and put a drop of blood on it, then pronounced the formula of dismissal.

As soon as I did that, both the despair and the conscience of someone being in the room with me vanished, and I found myself wondering what I had been so excited about. One of my lights had burned out and the contract lay on the floor where I had placed it. The whole thing was a disappointment. I could see how the medieval demon-raisers must have thought themselves bilked if this was all they got after the emotional tension and build-up and the danger of trouble with the Church.

But I wasn't through with it yet by any means. I don't usually dream much, and when I do, the dreams are the confused and disorderly kind most people have. But that night I had a perfectly clear, logical dream, just like watching myself on the screen of an extraordinarily clear television in color. I was going to the bank and drawing out everything I owned—there was a close-up of my hand writing the figures—and then going to the office of a broker named Wolff and telling him to buy stock in a firm called the Cal-Tex Oil Company. Then I saw a date-pad and myself telephoning Wolff to sell out just four days later.

The whole thing was so vivid and precise that I looked up the Cal-Tex Oil Company in the morning. There was such a firm all right, and its stock was selling around $1.75—a notorious dog. There was a broker named Wolff, too, with an address in the Benson Building. But I didn't follow the advice of the dream. After all, it seemed to me a pretty slender basis for investing everything I owned in a stock that might be good for wallpaper if it were carefully kept.

HOWEVER, that night I had the dream again, just as clearly pictured as before, only this time with a couple of small differences. The picture of me drawing out the money was accompanied by a series of red flashes, as though the dream was being insistent on what I should do. At least I took it for that. And the next sequence was changed; instead of going to Wolff's office, I was putting the money in an envelope and sending it to him with a letter by special messenger.

I don't know what caused the variation in procedure, but this time I decided to follow directions—that is, except about taking a chance on everything I owned. I couldn't quite do that, but I did sink most of the wad.

(He paused; Mr. Witherwax said expectantly: "And did you lose the money?")

No, I didn't, though I might as well. You see—wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. The first thing that happened was that on the morning after I sent Wolff the money I nearly fell over when I looked at the paper. Cal-Tex had hit a gusher of simply

mammoth proportions in an entirely new oilfield; its stock had already scored one of the most sensational rises in the history of the market and was still climbing. It was real, then. I hadn't imagined the visitation, and I had actually succeeded in bilking the devil.

Or so I thought until Cal called me up. I hadn't called him because—well, because I felt I had played him a rather shabby trick, in spite of his professed agnosticism and his willingness to sell a soul he didn't think he had. But now he called me up, very excited, and wanted me to come over at once.

As soon as I got inside the door, he almost shouted. "You were right! It worked; I know it worked; but it's nothing I want to monkey with any more. The damndest thing."

HE WENT on to tell me how, the night after I had tried my invocation, he had tried it himself, keeping steadily in mind his perfect sincerity of purpose, just as I had. The thing happened pretty much the same way; he had the shaking chill and the feeling of someone in the room without being able to see anyone, and the terrible melancholy that would have made suicide a positive pleasure, only it seemed to him that his lights had taken on a reddish tinge instead of the blue mine had. It frightened him; he hadn't imagined that hell was a depressing place. He pronounced the formula of dismissal almost at once.

But as with me, that wasn't the end of it. That night he had had a dream, just as vivid and precise as my own, only of a far different kind. What he saw was the option contract for the sale of his soul that we had worked out the other night, and then his own hand writing "Cancelled" across it, and both of us signing our names.

I said, "As a matter of fact, I'll even take up the option. I've just had some luck with money and if you want the five thousand—"

He said: "As a matter of fact, it's something I wouldn't really dare to go on with, even though I don't quite believe in it. Those few moments were pretty horrible and vile. I want to get out of the whole thing, and as it happens, I can—even pay you off your hundred. The strangest part of all is that I've had an amazing piece of luck. A broker named Wolff called me up this afternoon about my account. I'd never heard of him and didn't know I had any account, but it seems that someone sent him two thousand dollars by special messenger yesterday, with instructions to invest it in Cal-Tex Oil, and the stuff's gone up like a rocket. I can't imagine who did it; probably that nutsy uncle of mine out in Arizona, with all the dough. He wouldn't give you the time of day if you asked him, but he likes to surprise people. Have you got that crazy document with you?"

I began to see it then. I saw it all, almost in a flash, and it turned out I was right. I don't know how the bookkeeping system of the infernal regions operates, but when Cal summoned up a devil the night after I did, it must have become clear to them that I wasn't Cal Haugen, and the soul I was selling didn't really belong to me; I only had an option on it. That was why the dream changed the second night. I was directed to send the money in, instead of going in in person, so Wolff couldn't identify me. I wasn't a person to him, just a name on a sheet of paper. And of course, the devil had arranged it that I would make one of those stupid mistakes people sometimes make. I was thinking of Cal Haugen, so I'd put his signature on the letter to Wolff instead of writing my own name. But there wasn't anything I could do about it at this point. Even if I told Cal the whole story, he would have said I deserved it for trying to sell his soul instead of my own, and he would have been right. I saw a Bible on the table as I went out; the grimoires were gone.

Mr. Witherwax finished his Martini. "Did you try the formula again?" he asked, munching the olive.

"Yes. I wanted to find out whose soul I *had* sold. But the formula didn't work this time."

Mr. Cohan crossed himself again.

Heading by Joseph Eberle

. . . on trial at that macabre court, not for the past but for the future.

BOB waited, humming to himself in the stifling telephone booth, his collar and tie loosened for comfort in the late August heat, his Panama tilted rakishly over one ear to make room for the instrument. Through it he could hear a succession of female voices: "Garyville calling Oak Grove thuh-ree, tew, niyun, six . . . collect . . ." "Oak Grove. What was that number . . . ?" "Thuh-ree, tew . . ."

He stiffened as a low, sweetly familiar voice joined the chorus: "Yes, yes! I . . . I accept the charges . . . Hello? Hello! Bob . . . ?"

Instinctively he pressed the phone closer to his mouth, the touch of it conjuring up the feel of cool lips, soft blond hair, and eyes that could melt a steel girder.

"Marian? Sure it's me! . . . Jail? No! No, honey, that's all over. I'm free! Free as a bird, yeah! The judge said it was unavoidable. Told you, didn't I?" He mugged into the phone as though somehow, in this age of speed, she could see as well as hear him across the twenty-odd miles that separated them. "It was the postponement that did it. Then they got this new judge—and guess what? He used to go to school with Dad and Uncle Harry! It was a cinch after that . . . Huh?"

He frowned slightly, listening to the soft voice coming over the wire; the voice he could not wait to hear congratulating him. Only, she wasn't. She was talking to him—he grinned sheepishly—the way Mom talked to Dad sometimes, when he came swooping into the driveway. One drink too many at the country club after his Saturday golf . . .

"Say!" he snorted. "Aren't you *glad* I don't have to serve ten to twenty years for manslaughter . . . ?"

"Oh, Bob." There was a sadness in his fiancee's voice, a troubled note. "I . . . I'm glad. Of course I'm glad about it. But . . . it's just that you sound so smug, so . . . That poor old Negro . . ."

"Smug!" He stiffened, holding the phone away slightly as if it had stung him. "Honey . . . how can you say a thing like that! Why, I've done everything I could for his family. Paid—his mortgage on that little farm! Carted one of his kids to the hospital every week for two months, like . . ." His voice wavered, laden with a genuine regret. "Like the old guy would do himself, I guess, if he was still . . . *Marian!* You think I'm not *sorry* enough; is that it?" he demanded.

THERE was a little silence over the wire. He could picture her, sitting there quietly in the Marshall's cheery-chintz living room. Maybe she had her hair pinned back in one of those ridiculous, but oddly attractive, "horse-tails" the teen-agers were wearing this year. Her little cat-face would be tilted up to the lamp, eyes closed, the long fringe of lashes curling up over shadowy lids. Bob fidgetted, wanting miserably to see her expression at that moment.

"Well? Say something!"

The silence was broken by a faint sigh.

"Darling . . . What is there to say? You're so thoughtless! Not callous; I don't mean that. Just . . . *careless!* Bob, you've got to unlearn what they taught you in Korea. You're . . . you're home again, and this is what you've been fighting for, isn't it? For . . . for the people around us to be safe? For life not to be cheap, something to be thrown away just to save a little *time* . . ."

"Say, listen!" He was scowling now, anger hardening his mouth into ugly lines. "I've had enough lectures these past two months—from Dad, from the sheriff, from Uncle Harry. You'd think a guy twenty-two years old, in combat three years and got his feet almost frozen off, didn't know the score! What's the matter with everybody?" Bob's anger was mounting. "Listen! I got a medal last year for killing fourteen North Koreans. For gunning 'em down! Deliberately! But now, just because I'm driving a little too fast and some old creep can't get his wagon across the highway . . ."

"Bob!"

". . . now, all at once, I'm not a hero, I'm a murderer! I don't know the value of human life! I don't give a hoot how many people I . . ."

"Darling!"

A strangled sob came over the long miles. That stopped him. He gripped the phone, uncertainty in his oddly tip-tilted eyes that had earned him, in service, the nickname of "Gook."

"Darling, you're all mixed up. Bob . . . ? Bob dear, are you listening? If I could just *talk* to *you* tonight . . . ! What time is it? Oh, it's after *six!* I . . . I don't suppose you could drive over here tonight . . ."

The hard line of his mouth wavered, broke. He grinned.

"No? Who says I can't?" His laughter, young, winged and exultant, floated up. "By, I'll burn the road . . . Oops! I mean . . ." He broke off, sheepishly. "No, no; I'll keep 'er under fifty. Honest!" Laughing, he crossed his heart—knowing Marian so well that he knew she would sense the gesture left over from their school days. "There's so much to talk over now," he added eagerly. "Uncle Harry's taking me into the firm. I start peddling real estate for him next week. No kiddin'! And . . . and that little house we looked at . . . It's for sale, all right! Nine hundred down, and . . ."

"Bob . . . Hurry! Please!" The voice over the wire held, again, the tone he loved, laughing and tender. "But drive carefully. Promise!"

"Sure, sure! Twenty miles, twenty minutes!"

He hung up, chuckling, and strode out into the street. Dusk was falling, the slow Southern dusk that takes its time about folding its dark quilt over the Blue Ridge foothills. With a light, springy step Bob walked to where his blue convertible was parked outside the drugstore, sandwiched between a pickup truck and a sedan full of people. As he climbed under the steering wheel, he heard a boy's piping voice, followed by the shushing monotone of an elder:

"Look! That's Bob Trask! He killed that old Negro last Fourth-o-July . . ."

"Danny, hush! Don't talk so loud! He can hear . . ."

"Benny Olsen told me it's his second bad wrack . . ."

"Danny!"

". . . and that's the third car he's tore up in two years. Boy, you oughta seen that roadster he had! Sideswiped a truck and tore off the whole . . ."

"Hmph! License was never revoked, either! Politics! If his uncle wasn't city commissioner . . ."

Bob's scowl returned, cloudy with anger. People! They made up their own version of how an accident happened. That business with the truck, for instance. Swinging out into the highway just as he had tried to pass! Who could blame him for *that?* Or the fact that, weeks later, the burly driver had happened to die? From a ruptured appendix! The damage suit had been thrown out of court, because nobody could prove the collision had been what caused it to burst.

Backing out of the parking space in a bitter rush, Bob drove the convertible south, out of Gareyville on 31, headed for Oak Grove. Accidents! Anybody could be involved in an accident! Was a guy supposed to be lucky all the time? Or a mind-reader, always clairvoyant about the other driver?

AS THE white ribbon of highway unreeled before him, Bob's anger cooled. He smiled a little, settling behind the steering wheel and switching on the radio. Music poured out softly. He leaned back, soothed by its sound and the rush of wind tousling his dark hair.

The law had cleared him of reckless driving; and that was all that counted. The landscape blurred as the sun sank. Bob switched on his headlights, dimmed. There was, at this hour, not much traffic on the Chattanooga Road.

Glancing at his watch, Bob pressed his foot more heavily on the accelerator. Six-fifteen already? Better get to Marian's before that parent of hers insisted on dragging her off to a movie. He chuckled. His only real problem now was to win over Marian's mother, who made no bones of her disapproval of him, ever since his second wreck. "*Show me the way a man drives a car, and I'll tell you what he's like inside* . . ." Bob had laughed when Marian had repeated those words. A man could drive, he had pointed out, like an old-maid schoolteacher and still be involved in an accident that was not legally his fault. All right, *two* accidents! A guy could have lousy luck twice,

couldn't he? Look at the statistics! Fatal accidents happened every day . . .

Yawning, at peace with himself and the lazy countryside sliding past his car window, Bob let the speedometer climb another ten miles an hour. Sixty-five? He smiled, amused. Marian was such an old grandma about driving fast! After they were married, he would have to teach her, show her. Why, he had had this old boat up to ninety on this same tree-shaded stretch of highway! A driver like himself, a good driver with a good car, had perfect control over his vehicle at any . . .

The child seemed to appear out of nowhere, standing in the center of the road. A little girl in a frilly pink dress, her white face turned up in sudden horror, picked out by the headlights' glare.

Bob's cry was instinctive as he stamped on the brakes, and wrenched at the steering wheel. The car careened wildly, skidding sidewise and striking the child broadside. Then, in a tangle of wheels and canvas top, it rolled into a shallow ditch, miraculously rightside up. Bob felt his head strike something hard—the windshield. It starred out with tiny shimmering cracks, but did not shatter. Darkness rushed over him; the sick black darkness of the unconscious; but through it, sharp as a knifethrust, bringing him back to hazy awareness, was the sound of a child screaming.

"Oh, no ohmygodohgod . . ." Someone was sobbing, whimpering the words aloud. Himself.

Shaking his head blurrily, Bob stumbled from the tilted vehicle and looked about. Blood was running from a cut in his forehead, and his head throbbed with a surging nausea. But, ignoring the pain, he sank to his knee and peered under the car.

She was there. A little girl perhaps five years old. Ditch water matted the soft blond hair and trickled into the half-closed eyes, tiptilted at a pixie-like angle and fringed with long silky lashes. Bob groaned aloud, cramming his knuckles into his squared mouth to check the sob that burst out of him like a gust of desperate wind. She was pinned under a front wheel. Such a lovely little girl, appearing out here, miles from town, dressed as for a party. A sudden thought struck him that he knew this child, that he had seen her somewhere, sometime. On a bus? In a movie lobby . . . ? Where?

He crawled under the car afraid to touch her, afraid not to. She did not stir. Was she dead? Weren't those frilly little organdy ruffles on her small chest moving, ever so faintly . . . ? If he could only get her out from under that wheel! Get the car moving, rush her to a hospital . . . ! Surely, surely there was some spark of life left in that small body . . . !

Bob stood up, reeling, rubbing his eyes furiously as unconsciousness threatened to engulf him again. It was at that moment that he heard the muffled roar of a motorcycle. He whirled. Half in eagerness, half in dread, he saw a shadowy figure approaching down the twilight-misted highway.

THE figure on the motorcycle, goggled and uniformed as a State Highway Patrolman, braked slowly a few feet away. With maddening deliberateness of movement, he dismounted, flipped out a small report-pad, and peered at the convertible, jotting down its license number. Bob beckoned frantically, pointing at the child pinned under the car. But the officer made no move to help him free her; took no notice of her beyond a cursory glance and a curt nod.

Instead, tipping back his cap from an oddly pale face, he rested one booted foot on the rear bumper and beckoned Bob to his side.

"All right, buddy . . ." His voice, Bob noted crazily, was so low that he could scarcely hear it; a whisper, a lip-movement pronouncing sounds that might have been part of the wind soughing in the roadside trees. "Name: Robert Trask? I had orders to be on the lookout for you . . ."

"Orders?" Bob bristled abruptly, caught between anxiety for the child under his car and an instinct for self-preservation. "Now, wait! I've got no record of reckless driving. I . . . I was involved in a couple of accidents; but the charges were dropped . . . Look!" he burst out. "While you're standing here yapping, this child may be . . . Get on that scooter of yours and go phone an ambulance, you! I'll report you for dereliction of duty! . . . Say!" he yelled, as the officer did not

move, but went on scribbling in his book. "What kind of a man *are* you, anyway? Wasting time booking me, when there still may be time to save this . . . this poor little . . . !"

The white, goggle-obscured face lifted briefly, expressionless as a mask. Bob squirmed under the scrutiny of eyes hidden behind the green glass; saw the lips move . . . and noticed, for the first time, how queerly the traffic officer held his head. His pointed chin was twisted sidewise, meeting the left shoulder. When he looked up, his whole body turned, like a man with a crick in his neck . . .

"What kind of man are *you?*" said the whispering lips. "That's what we have to find out . . . And that's why I got orders to bring you in. *Now!*"

"Bring me in . . . ?" Bob nodded dully. "Oh, you mean I'm under arrest? Sure, sure . . . But the little girl!" He glared, suddenly enraged by the officer's stolid indifference to the crushed form under the car. "Listen, if you don't get on that motorbike and go for help, I . . . I'll knock you out and go myself! Resisting arrest; leaving the scene of an accident . . . Charge me with anything you like! But if there's still time to save her . . ."

The goggled eyes regarded him steadily for a moment. Then, nodding, the officer scribbled something else in his book.

"Time?" the windy whisper said, edged with irony. "Don't waste time, eh? . . . Why don't you speed-demons think about other people *before* you kill them off? Why? *Why?* That's what we want to find out, what we *have* to find out . . . *Come on!*" The whisper lashed out, sibilant as a striking snake. "Let's go, buddy! *Walk!*"

Bob blinked, swayed. The Highway Patrolman, completely ignoring the small body pinned under the convertible, had strode across the paved road with a peremptory beckoning gesture. He seemed headed for a little byroad that branched off the highway, losing itself among a thick grove of pine trees. It must, Bob decided eagerly, lead to some farmhouse where the officer meant to phone for an ambulance. Staggering, he followed, with a last anxious glance at the tiny form spread-eagled under his car wheel. Where had he seen that little face? *Where* . . . ? Some neighbor's child, visiting out here in the country . . . ?

"You . . . you think she's . . . dead?" he blurted, stumbling after the shadowy figure ahead of him. "Is it too late . . . ?"

The officer with the twisted neck half-turned, swiveling his whole body to look back at him.

"That," the whispering voice said, "all depends. Come on, you—snap it up! We got all night, but there's no sense wastin' time! Eh, buddy?" The thin lips curled ironically. "Time! That's the most important thing in the world . . . to them as still have it!"

Swaying dizzily, Bob hurried after him up the winding little byroad. It led, he saw with a growing sense of unease, through a country cemetery . . . Abruptly, he brought up short, peering ahead at a gray gleam through the pines. Why, there was no farmhouse ahead! A fieldstone chapel with a high peaked roof loomed against the dusk, its arched windows gleaming redly in the last glow of the sunset.

"Hey!" he snapped. "What *is* this? Where the hell are you taking me?"

The highway patrolman turned again, swiveling his body instead of his stiff, twisted neck.

"Night court," his whisper trailed back on a thread of wind.

"*Night* court!" Bob halted completely, anger stiffening his resolve not to be railroaded into anything, no matter what he had done to that lovely little girl back there in the ditch. "Say! Is this some kind of a gag? A kangaroo court, is it? You figure on lynching me after you've . . . ?"

HE GLANCED about the lonely graveyard in swift panic, wondering if he could make a dash for it. This was no orderly minion of the law, this crazy, deformed figure stalking ahead of him! A crank, maybe? Some joker dressed up as a highway patrolman . . . ? Bob backed away a few steps, glancing left and right. A crazy man, a crackpot . . . ?

He froze. The officer held a gun leveled at his heart.

"Don't try it!" The whisper cracked like a

whiplash. "Come on, bud. You'll get a fair trial in this court—fairer then the likes of you deserve!"

Bob moved forward, helpless to resist. The officer turned his back, almost insolently, and stalked on up the narrow road. At the steps of the chapel he stood aside, however, waving his gun for Bob to open the heavy doors. Swallowing on a dry throat, he obeyed—and started violently as the rusty hinges made a sound like a hollow groan.

Then, hesitantly, his heart beginning to hammer with apprehension, Bob stepped inside. Groping his way into the darker interior of the chapel, he paused for a moment to let his eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Row on row of hardwood benches faced a raised dais, on which was a pulpit. Here, Bob realized with a chill coursing down his spine, local funeral services were held for those to be buried in the churchyard outside. As he moved forward, his footsteps echoed eerily among the beamed rafters overhead . . .

Then he saw them. People in those long rows of benches! Why, there must be over a hundred of them, seated in silent bunches of twos and threes, facing the pulpit. In a little alcove, set aside for the choir, Bob saw another, smaller group—and found himself suddenly counting them with a surge of panic. There were twelve in the choir box. Twelve, the number of a jury! Dimly he could see their white faces, with dark hollows for eyes, turning to follow his halting progress down the aisle.

Then, like an echo of a voice, deep and reverberating, someone called his name.

"The defendant will please take the stand . . . !"

Bob stumbled forward, his scalp prickling at the ghostly resemblance of this mock-trial to the one in which he had been acquitted only that morning. As though propelled by unseen hands, he found himself hurrying to a seat beside the pulpit, obviously reserved for one of the elders, but now serving as a witness-stand. He sank into the big chair, peering through the half-darkness in an effort to make out some of the faces around him . . .

Then, abruptly, as the "bailiff" stepped forward to "swear him in," he stifled a cry of horror.

The man had no face. Where his features had been there was a raw, reddish mass. From this horror, somehow, a nightmare slit of mouth formed the words: ". . . to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I . . . I do," Bob murmured; and compared to the whispered tones of the bailiff, his own voice shocked him with its loudness.

"State your name."

"R-robert Trask . . ."

"Your third offense, isn't it, Mr. Trask?" the judge whispered drily. "A habitual reckless-driver . . ."

Bob was shaking now, caught in the grip of a nameless terror. What was this? Who were all these people, and why had they had him brought here by a motorcycle cop with a twisted . . . ?

He caught his breath again sharply, stifling another cry as the figure of a dignified elderly man became visible behind the pulpit, where before he had been half-shrouded in shadow. Bob blinked at him, sure that his stern white face was familiar—very familiar, not in the haunting way in which that child had seemed known to him, lying there crushed under his car. This man . . .

His head reeled all at once. Of course! Judge Abernathy! Humorous, lenient old Judge Ab, his father's friend, who had served in the Gareyville circuit court . . . Bob gulped. In 1932! Why, he had been only a youngster then! Twenty years would make this man all of ninety-eight years old, if . . . And it was suddenly that *"if"* which made Bob's scalp prickle with uneasiness. *If he were alive.* Judge Ab was *dead!* Wasn't he? Hadn't he heard his mother and dad talking about the old man, years ago; talking in hushed, sorrowful tones about the way he had been killed by a hit-and-run driver who had never been caught?

Bob shook his head, fighting off the wave of dizziness and nausea that was creeping over him again. It was crazy, the way his imagination was running away with him! Either this was not Judge Ab, but some old fellow who vaguely resembled him in this half-light . . . Or it *was* Judge Ab, alive, looking no older than he had twenty-odd

years ago, at which time he was supposed to have been killed.

Squinting out across the rows of onlookers, Bob felt a growing sense of unreality. He could just make out, dimly, the features of the people seated in the first two rows of benches. Other faces, pale blurs against the blackness, moved restlessly as he peered at them . . . Bob gasped. His eyes made out things in the semi-gloom that he wished he had not seen. Faces mashed and cut beyond the semblance of a face! Bodies without arms! One girl . . . He swayed in his chair sickly; her shapely form was without a head!

He got a grip on his nerves with a tremendous effort. Of course! It wasn't real; it was all a horrible, perverted sort of practical joke! All these people were tricked up like corpses in a Chamber-of-Commerce "horror" parade. He tried to laugh, but his lips jerked with the effort . . . Then they quivered, sucking in breath.

The "prosecuting attorney" had stepped forward to question him—as, hours ago, he had been questioned by the attorney for Limestone County. Only . . . Bob shut his eyes quickly. It couldn't be! They wouldn't, whoever these people in this lonely chapel might be, they *wouldn't* make up some old Negro to look like the one whose wagon he had . . . had . . .

The figure moved forward, soundlessly. Only someone who had seen him on the morgue slab, where they had taken him after the accident, could have dreamed up that wooly white wig, that wrinkled old black face, and . . . And that gash at his temple, on which now the blood seemed to have dried forever . . .

"Hidy, Cap'm," the figure said in a diffident whisper. "I got to ast you a few questions. Don't lie, now! Dat's de *wust* thing you could do—tell a lie in dis-*yeah* court! . . . "Bout how fast you figger you was goin' when you run over de girl-baby?"

Bob stared down at the kindly black face, smiling up at him, soothing him, telling him not to be afraid, but to tell the truth.

"I . . . Pretty fast," he blurted. "Sixty-five, maybe seventy an hour."

The man he had killed nodded, frowning. "Yassuh. Dat's about right, sixty-five accordin' to de officer here." He glanced at the patrolman with the twisted neck, who gave a brief, grotesque nod of agreement.

Bob waited sickly. The old Negro—or whoever was dressed up as a dead man—moved toward him, resting his hand on the ornate rail of the chapel pulpit.

"Cap'm . . ." His soft whisper seemed to come from everywhere, rather than from the moving lips in that black face. "Cap'm . . . *why?* How come you was drivin' fifteen miles over the speed-limit on this-yeah road? Same road where you run into my wagon . . ."

The listeners in the tiers of pews began to sway all at once, like reeds in the wind. *"Why?"* someone in the rear took up the word, and then another echoed it, until a faint, rhythmic chant rose and fell all over the crowded chapel:

"Why? Why? Why? . . . Why? Why? Why?"

"Order!" The "judge," the man who looked like a judge long dead, banged softly with his gavel; or it could have been a shutter banging at one of those arched chapel windows, Bob thought strangely.

THE chanting died away. Bob swallowed nervously. For, the old Negro was looking up at him expectantly, waiting for an answer to his simple question—the question echoed by those looking and listening from that eery "courtroom." *Why?* Why was he driving so fast? If he could only make up something, some good reason . . .

"I . . . I had a date with my girl," Bob heard his own voice, startling in its volume compared to the whispers around him.

"Yassuh?" The black prosecutor nodded gently. "She was gwine off someplace, so's you had to hurry to catch up wid her? Or else, was she bad-off sick and callin' for you . . . ?"

"I . . . No," Bob said, miserably honest. "No. There wasn't any hurry. I just . . . didn't want to . . ." He gestured futilely. "I wanted to be with her as quick as I could! Be-because I love her . . ." He paused, waiting to hear a titter of mirth ripple over the listeners.

There was no laughter. Only silence, sombre and accusing.

"Yassuh." Again the old Negro nodded

his graying head, the head with the gashed temple. "All of us wants to be wid the ones we love. We don't want to waste no time doin' it . . . Only, you got to remember: de Lawd give each of us a certain po'tion of time to use. And He don't aim for us to cut off de supply dat belong to somebody else. They got a right to live and love and be happy, too!"

The grave words hit Bob like a hammer blow—or like, he thought oddly, words he had been forming in his own mind, but holding off, not letting himself think because they might hurt. He fidgetted in the massive chair, twisting his hands together in sudden grim realization. Remorse had not, up to this moment, touched him deeply. But now it brought tears welling up, acid-like, to burn his eyes.

"Oh . . . please!" he burst out. "Can't we get this over with, this . . . this crazy mock-trial? I don't know who you are, all you people here. But I know you've . . . you've been incensed because my . . . my folks pulled some wires and got me out of two traffic-accidents that I . . . I should have been punished for! Now I've . . . I've run over a little girl, and you're afraid if I go to regular court-trial, my uncle will get me free again; is that it? That's it, isn't it . . . ?" he lashed out, half-rising. "All this . . . this masquerade! Getting yourselves up like . . . like people who are dead . . . ! You're doing it to scare me!" He laughed harshly. "But it doesn't scare me, kid tricks like . . . like . . ."

He broke off, aware of another figure that had moved forward, rising from one of the forward benches. A burly man in overalls, wearing a trucker's cap . . . One big square hand was pressed to his side, and he walked as though in pain. Bob recognized those rugged features with a new shock.

"Kid . . . listen!" His rasping whisper sounded patient, tired. "We ain't here to scare nobody . . . Hell, that's for Hallowe'en parties! The reason we hold court here, night after night, tryin' some thick-skinned jerk who thinks he owns the road . . . Look, we just want t' know *why;* see? Why we had to be killed. Why some nice joe like you, with a girl and a happy future ahead of 'im, can't understand that . . . that *we* had a right to live, too! Me! Just a dumb-lug of a truck jockey, maybe . . . But I was doin' all right. I was gettin' by, raisin' my kids right . . ." The square hand moved from the man's side, gestured briefly and pressed back again.

"I figured to have my fool appendix out, soon as I made my run and got back home that Sunday. Only, you . . . Well, gee! Couldn't you have spared me ten seconds, mac?" the hoarse whisper accused. "Wouldn't you loan me that much of your . . . your precious time, instead of takin'

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away all of mine? Mine, and this ole darkey's? And tonight . . ."

An angry murmur swept over the onlookers, like a rising wind.

"Order!" The gavel banged again, like a muffled heartbeat. "The accused is not on trial for previous offenses. Remarks of the defense attorney—who is distinctly out of order!—will be stricken from the record. Does the prosecution wish to ask the defendant any more questions to determine the *reason* for the accident?"

The old Negro shook his head, shrugging. "Nawsuh, Jedge. Reckon not."

Bob glanced sidewise at the old man who looked so like Judge Ab. He sucked in a quick breath as the white head turned, revealing a hideously crushed skull matted with some dark brown substance. Hadn't his father said something, years ago, about that hit-and-run driver running a wheel over his old friend's head? Were those . . . were those tire-tread marks on this man's white collar . . . ? Bob ground his teeth. How far would these Hallowe'en mummers go to make their macabre little show realistic . . . ?

But now, to his amazement, the burly man in trucker's garb moved forward, shrugging.

"Okay, Your Honor," his hoarse whisper apologized. "I . . . I know it's too late for justice, not for us here. And if the court appoints me to defend this guy, I'll try . . . Look, buddy," his whisper softened. "You have reason to believe your girl was steppin' out on you? That why you was hurryin', jumpin' the speed-limit, to get there before she . . . ? You were out of your head, crazy-jealous?"

Bob glared. "Say!" he snapped. "This is going too far, dragging my fiancee's name into this . . . this fake-trial . . . Go ahead! I'm guilty of reckless driving—three times! I admit it! There was no reason on this earth for me to be speeding, no excuse for running over that . . . that poor little kid! It's . . . it's just that I . . ." His voice broke, and suddenly he was sobbing uncontrollably. "I didn't *see* her! Out here in the middle of nowhere—a child! How was I to know? The highway was clear, and then all at once, there she was right in front of my car . . . But . . . but I *was* going too fast. I deserve to be lynched! Nothing you do to me would be enough . . ."

He crumpled in the chair, shaken with dry sobs of remorse. But fear, terror of this weirdly-made-up congregation, left him slowly, as, looking from the Judge to the highway patrolman, from the old Negro to the trucker, he saw only pity in their faces, and a kind of sad bewilderment.

"But—why? Why need it happen?" the elderly Judge asked softly, in a stern voice Bob thought he could remember from childhood. "Why does it go on and on? This senseless slaughter! If we could only *understand* . . . ! If we could make the living understand, and stop and think, before it's too late for . . . another such as we. There is no such thing as an accidental death! Accidents are murders—because someone could have prevented them!"

THE white-haired man sighed, like a soft wind blowing through the chapel. The sigh was caught up by others, until it rose and fell like a wailing gust echoing among the rafters.

Bob shivered, hunched in his chair. The hollow eyes of the judge fixed themselves on him, stern but pitying. He hung his head, and buried his face in his hands, smearing blood from the cut on his forehead.

"I . . . I . . . Please! Please don't say any more!" he sobbed. "I guess I just didn't realize, I was too wrapped up in my own selfish . . ." His voice broke. "And now it's too late . . ."

As one, the shadowy figures of the old Negro and the burly truck driver moved together in a kind of grim comradeship. They looked at the judge mutely as though awaiting his decision. The gaunt figure with the crushed skull cleared his throat in a way Bob thought he remembered . . .

"Too late? Yes . . . for these two standing before you. But the dead," his sombre whisper rose like a gust of wind in the dark chapel, "the dead can not punish the living. They are part of the past, and have no control over the present . . . or the future."

"Yet, sometimes," the dark holes of eyes bored into Bob's head sternly, "the dead can guide the living, by giving them a glimpse into the future. The future as it will be . . .

unless the living use their power to change it! Do you understand, Robert Trask? Do you understand that you are on trial in this night court, not for the past but for the future . . . ?"

Bob shook his head, bewildered. "The . . . the future? I don't understand. I . . ." He glanced up eagerly. "The little girl! You . . . you mean, she's all right? She isn't dead . . . ?" he pressed, hardly daring to hope.

"She is not yet born," the old man whispered quietly. "But one day you will see her, just as you saw her tonight, lying crushed under your careless wheels . . . unless . . ." The whisper changed abruptly; became the dry official voice of a magistrate addressing his prisoner. "It is therefore the judgment of this court that, in view of the defendant's plea of guilty and in view of his extreme youth and of his war-record, sentence shall be suspended pending new evidence of criminal behavior in the driver's seat of a motor vehicle. If such new evidence should be brought to the attention of this court, sentence shall be pronounced and the extreme penalty carried out . . . Do you understand, Mr. Trask?" the grave voice repeated. *"The extreme penalty!* . . . Case dismissed."

The gavel banged. Bob nodded dazedly, again burying his face in his hands and shaking with dry sobs. A wave of dizziness swept over him. He felt the big chair tilt, it seemed, and suddenly he was falling, falling forward into a great black vortex that swirled and eddied . . .

LIGHT snatched him back to consciousness, a bright dazzling light that pierced his eyeballs and made him gag with nausea. Hands were pulling at him, lifting him. Then, slowly, he became aware of two figures bending over him: a gnome-like little man with a lantern, and a tall, sunburned young man in the uniform of a Highway Patrolman. It was not, Bob noted blurrily, the same one, the one with the twisted neck . . . He sat up, blinking.

"My, my, young feller!" The gnome with the lantern was trying to help him up from where he lay on the chapel floor in front of the pulpit. "Nasty lump on your head there! I'm the sexton: live up the road a piece. I heard your car hit the ditch a while ago, and called the Highway Patrol. Figgered you was drunk . . ." He sniffed suspiciously, then shrugged. "Don't smell drunk. What happened? You fall asleep at the wheel?"

Bob shut his eyes, groaning. He let himself be helped to one of the front pews and leaned back against it heavily before answering. Better tell the truth now. Get it over with . . .

"The . . . little girl. Pinned under my car —you found her?" He forced out the words sickly. "I . . . didn't see her, but . . . It was my fault. I was . . . driving too fast. Too fast to stop when she stepped out right in front on my . . ."

He broke off, aware that the tall tanned officer was regarding him with marked suspicion.

"What little girl?" he snapped. "There's nobody pinned under your car, buddy! I looked. Your footprints were the only ones leading away from the accident . . . and I traced them here! Besides, you were dripping blood from that cut on your . . . Say! You trying to kid somebody?"

"No, no!" Bob gestured wildly. "Who'd kid about a thing like . . . ? Maybe the other Highway Patrolman took her away on his motorcycle! He . . . All of them . . . There didn't seem any doubt that she'd been killed instantly. But then, the judge said she . . . she wasn't even born yet! They made me come here, to . . . to try me! In . . . night court, they called it! All of them pretending to be . . . dead people, accident victims. Blood all over them! Mangled . . ." He checked himself, realizing how irrational he sounded. "I fainted," his voice trailed uncertainly. "I guess when they . . . they heard you coming, they all ran away . . ."

"*Night* court?" The officer arched one eyebrow, tipped back his cap, and eyed Bob dubiously. "Say, you *sure* you're sober, buddy? Or maybe you got a concussion . . . There's been nobody here. Not a soul; has there, Pop?"

"Nope." The sexton lifted his lamp positively, causing shadows to dance weirdly over the otherwise empty chapel. A film of dust covered the pews, undisturbed save where Bob himself now sat. "Ain't been nary a soul here since the Wilkins funeral;

that was Monday three weeks ago. My, you never saw the like o' flowers . . ."

The Highway Patrolman gestured him to silence, peering at Bob once more. "What was that you said about another speed cop? There was no report tonight. What was his badge number? You happen to notice?"

Bob shook his head vaguely; then dimly recalled numbers he had seen on a tarnished shield pinned to that shadowy uniform.

"Eight something . . . 84! That was it! And . . . and he had a kind of twisted set to his head . . ."

The officer scowled suddenly, hands on hips. "Sa-ay!" he said in a cold voice. "What're you tryin' to pull? Nobody's worn Badge No. 84 since Sam Lacy got killed two years ago. Chasin 'a speed-crazy high school kid, who swerved and made him fall off his motor. Broke his neck!" He compressed his lips grimly. "You tryin' to pull some kind of gag about *that?*"

"No! N-no . . . !" Bob rose shakily to his feet. "I . . . I . . . Maybe I just dreamed it all! That clonk on the head . . ." He laughed all at once, a wild sound, full of hysterical relief. "You're positive there was no little girl pinned under my wheel? No . . . no signs of . . . ?"

He started toward the wide-flung doors of the chapel, reeling with laughter. But it had all seemed so real! Those nightmare faces, the whispering voices: that macabre trial for a traffic fatality that had never happened anywhere but in his own overwrought imagination . . . !

STILL laughing, he climbed into his convertible; found it undamaged by its dive into the ditch, and backed out onto the road again. He waved. Shrugging, grinning, the Highway officer and the old sexton waved back, visible in a yellow circle of lantern-light.

Bob gunned his motor and roared away. A lone tourist, rounding a curve, swung sharply off the pavement to give him room as he swooped over on the wrong side of the yellow line. Bob blew his horn mockingly, and trod impatiently on the accelerator. Marian must be tired of waiting! And the thought of holding her in his arms, laughing with her, telling her about that crazy dream-trial . . . Dead men! Trying him, the living, for the traffic-death of a child yet to be born! "The extreme penalty!" If not lynching, what would that be? He smiled, amused. Was anything that could happen to a man really "a fate worse than death . . . ?"

Bob's smile froze.

Quite suddenly his foot eased up on the accelerator. His eyes widened, staring ahead at the dark highway illuminated by the twin glare of his headlights. Sweat popped out on his cool forehead all at once. Jerkily his hands yanked at the smooth plastic of the steering-wheel, pulling the convertible well over to the right side of the highway . . .

In that instant, Bob thought he knew where he had seen the hauntingly familiar features of that lovely little girl lying dead, crushed, under the wheel of his car. "The extreme penalty?" He shuddered, and slowed down, driving more carefully into the darkness ahead. The darkness of the future . . .

For, the child's blond hair and long lashes, he knew with a swift chill of dread, had been a tiny replica of Marian's . . . and the tip-tilted pixy eyes, closed in violent death, had borne a startling resemblance to his own.

I stared up at a gentle, ravaged face and into the saddest pair of eyes I have ever seen.

Heading by W. H. Silvey

In Camera

BY JOHN WARD

OUR co-incidental meeting in the Last Horizon Club called for a bull session. We pitched it in Pick's room, with all the liquid impedimenta. Pick had just returned from the Ankor Thom country, Guy Van Toon from the Hindu Kush. Eskimo Ike was marking time until his Arctic Diesel-schooner was equipped, and I had come ashore that morning off an American Export freighter after two years in the hell-hole of the world—Timbuktu.

The second time the steward came in to correct the cracked ice situation he handed Pick a note on Club stationery. Pick scanned it swiftly, looked thoughtful for several ticks, stuffed it in a pocket and said, "Young Frank Simons is down in the lobby with a friend of his. Wants to know if they can join us for a while. I say it's agreeable to me—Frank's a good lad. Any objections?" As this was an impromptu free-for-all, there weren't, so Pick told the steward to fetch 'em up.

When the two unexpected but thoroughly welcome guests came into the room I got a quick impression that young Simons did

not look his usual rugged, exuberant self.

His companion was a compact, middle-aged man as British as fish and chips. Young Simons introduced him simply as, "My friend Mr. Henry Featherstone of Nairobi."

Mr. Featherstone and Van Toon bowed politely to each other. It was evident they had rubbed noses sometime in the past and were satisfied to let it go at that. As I hadn't been in British East Africa for seven years, this monocled bird was a new chum to me.

Pick greeted our youngest member with the Club's time-honored rib, "Hello, Frank, been out of town?" That's as much of a greeting a year's absence from New York rates at the Last Horizon Club.

Frank grinned and quipped back weakly, "Oh—I just ran over to Kenya for the week-end, Captain Pickering."

"It's incomprehensible to me," wheezed Van Toon in his nasty manner, "why you young squirts waste your time and other people's money puttering about Equatorial Africa. Today, it's about as mysterious or virgin as Park Avenue. It's been overdone. I did it—thoroughly. There's been nothing new come out of Africa since I left there five years ago."

As I am a very human sort of cuss, Van Toon's deliberate ignoring of the years, personal fortune and health I have given to the Dark Continent irritated me. Well, he was one man who could irritate me without half trying. He was a bulky, virilely handsome man and his world-wide reputation as an explorer was unassailable. He had brains, courage and imagination plus. On the other side of the ledger he was arrogant, jealous, inordinately vain and bad-tempered.

I winked at the youngster and said, "I'm surprised to hear such drivel from you, Van Toon. There's always something new. Everywhere. Didn't old, decrepit Pick here just uncover another hidden city in the Cambodian jungle that's been under the eyes of the French engineers since the days of Mouhot? Get anything worthwhile this trip, Frank?"

Young Simons stared at me in the oddest way. Now I knew there was something wrong with him. He was wire-drawn and the hand that held his whiskey-and shook.

"I had a marvelous run of weather, Mr. Nevers," he said, "and got some fine studies. At least I think so. One reel of film I shot is—well, really something new. As you were saying, sir, there's always the possibility that there might be something—ah—not exactly new, you understand—just hidden? Like the lost city Captain Pickering found? Sort of not visible to everyone—maybe just to someone who had the right vision—the peculiar power to see it? I'm not making myself very clear, am I?"

His grave eyes flickered over us and came to focus on Van Toon. The great man was paying no attention. He was boldly studying the face of the man from Nairobi and his puzzled expression indicated he was calling hard on his memory.

What the devil? I thought.

"Hoy!" said Pick, "the lad has stumbled on something good."

Young Simons essayed a smile at Pick but it was only a caricature of a smile. Decidedly, there was something very wrong with this young man. Something bad had happened to him on his last venture. I had seen that watchful, apprehensive look before in the eyes of men for whom the Veil had been drawn aside in some far-off place.

Eskimo Ike waved an encouraging glass and nodded. "Sure. We all understand just what you mean, Frank. What did you dig up? Can we see it? Or is it a secret?"

"Well, Mr. Morehouse it's just a roll of film but, in a way, it is a secret. I mean to say, I wouldn't show it to everyone. So far, Mr. Featherstone is the only person who's seen it. I had to show it to him. But I particularly want to show it to you four men for I have every confidence in you. I am fortunate that I found you here together tonight. That's the reason I crashed your party, Captain Pickering. To ask you all if you would be good enough to look at this film and tell me what you think of it and what should be done about the matter. It's a short reel and will only take a few minutes to run off. I will consider it a great favor. Will you do it?"

"But of course, dear boy," said Pick, matching young Simons' serious mood. "We

appreciate your thought, and I daresay we'll enjoy it. When and where? Say the word."

"Thank you Captain," said Frank. "Can you come to the projection room in fifteen minutes? I'll arrange with Janney for its use and have him see that everything is okay."

"All right with us, Frank," agreed Pick. "By the way, Janney's an expert operator. He'll be glad to run off the reel for you. Ask him."

Frank shook his head. "No, that won't do. I'll run it. I don't want anyone in there but you four men and Henry."

"Very well then. We'll see you there in fifteen minutes. Oh—pardon, fellers. I'm speaking for all of us I presume?" Pick cocked an eyebrow. Ike and I nodded.

"I have too few precious minutes left to me, to waste them being bored to death," grunted Van Toon ungraciously.

Frank started to say something to him, changed his mind, made a gesture of defeat, said, "Come along Henry" and stepped out into the corridor.

THE Last Horizon Club is very proud of its midget theatre. It was designed by an ex-Pathe newshawk and its equipment is the best. From its silver screen many remarkable pictures have been reflected. Amazing pictures. Pictures not made for profit or public entertainment—a lot of them would have laid a censor out cold—but for scientific observation and for their proper place in the archives of anthropology.

Pick's, Ike's and my eyes being all about the same age, we selected seats half-way down, on the left side of the aisle. The Featherstone bird parked himself opposite, but a row back. Young Simons started up the short, steep stair that leads to the projection booth. A smart knocking outside pulled him down. He unlocked the door and admitted the knocker. It was Van Toon. He had reversed himself. Without a word of explanation he dropped into a seat in the back row. His gutteral, asthmatic breathing was painful to hear. That last trip to the Hindu Kush must have played the very devil with his heart and lungs.

Frank opened the little slide window in the front of the booth and called down to us. "Gentlemen, just a word. I'm going to ask you again to indulge me in a whim. Much of what you are going to see is very familiar to you—old stuff, as Mr. Van Toon says. You're also going to witness something strange—inexplicable. Something so unnatural that your first impulse will be to cry out against it and demand an explanation that I'm unable to give you. Won't you please reserve all comment until the entire picture has been shown?"

"Okay Frank, we'll keep shut," sang out Ike. "Shoot."

"Thanks. It's a silent—not a sound film and I hasten to assure you no lecture goes with it. I'll merely tell you that on the morning of September Eighteenth last, taking only Mruni the headman, my Sikh gunbearer, ten black boys and two Batwa pygmies, I struck out from camp for Mount Mikeno to try for gorilla pictures. Along the way I ran into some exceptionally well posed groups of other beasties and took some short shots. The first was at a waterhole not far from camp and this is what I . . ."

The little theatre went suddenly dark and the lightbeam leaped over our heads.

In the immediate foreground, a waterhole. In the middle distance, a grove of beautiful, flat-topped mimosas. Arising from the dark mass of the jungle back of the grove, a black, sinister pyramid—Mount Mikeno, one minute sharply defined against the steel-white sky, the next, shrouded with fog. Hundreds of oryx, wildebeeste and zebra clustered around the waterhole. Some placidly grazed over the expanse of ground between the waterhole and the grove. Some stood immobile, somnolent under the feathery mimosas.

A familiar vista, but still a beautiful and heart-tingling one. Frank's photography was superb. It was almost stereoptic, so high was the relief of the living creatures and the trees against the background. Which is pretty close to a miracle of picture making in Equatorial Africa.

Pick's telescopic eye caught it first.

"What the hell is that, Walter?" he whispered in my ear.

From the dark jungle wall back of the mimosa grove, came a tiny figure, making

its way slowly but steadily toward the camera. Instinctively you knew it was not an animal. Nor a native black stalker. As it emerged from the jungle haze into the clearer light of the grove, you plainly perceived that it was a white man. On he came, head down, preoccupied; weaving through those hundreds of wild things as unconcerned as a farmer in a meadow of Jerseys. At the far edge of the waterhole he paused, lifted his face to the sky and extended his arms, palms upward, like a witch-doctor invoking the Rain God.

I don't mean to say this gave us a clean-cut view of him, or that his features were distinguishable. He was not close up enough and he was slightly blurred. This defect in otherwise superior photography puzzled me. We could see that he was a tall, frail fellow, dressed in the ragged remains of a khaki shirt, baggy breeches held up by a wide metal-studded leather belt and riding boots. A battered topee shaded the upper half of his face and his jaw was covered by a stubble of beard. He was a wretched, pathetic and at the same time, a disquieting figure.

He dropped his arms, his chin sagged on his bony breast and he slowly walked along the rim of the waterhole and out of the picture.

Pick dug his talons into my leg and indicated he was about to sound off. I discouraged him with an elbow. I knew as well as he did that we had just looked at the picture of a thing that could never had happened. Frank had prepared us for something out of the ordinary—something unnatural. This was not only unnatural, it was impossible.

For never a wild head tossed, never a questing muzzle flared, as the ragged man paced deliberately through these timorous creatures. Not the slightest indication did they give of any awareness of his presence.

It was though he had not passed that way.

The camera moved on, not dead ahead, but panorama-wise and picked up a grand herd of giraffe. Bulls, cows and totos feeding on thorn trees. Frank had managed to get within first-rate "shooting" range of them. Even so it was necessary to maintain distance for it's no trick at all to stampede giraffe. That's why the sight of the ragged man, arms outstretched, face uplifted, standing in the midst of these hypersensitive animals was utterly preposterous.

Again he dropped his arms and faded from sight in the thorn trees.

"It's a damned hoax, Walter," whispered Pick angrily. I paid him no attention and Ike hissed at him.

The scene switched abruptly to a big donga. It was a perfect setting; for lion; a place of tall reeds and greatrocks. Frank had caught a magnificent group of these impressive beasts. On a slightly slanting, table-topped rock stood a full-maned, prime male, as static as a figure in a museum case. Along the base of the rock lay four lovely lady lions, tolerantly watching the antics of three cubs. A few yards away, two young males were gazing with speculative eyes at the handsome older chum on the pedestal.

It was keen work on Frank's part. He had edged in very close; much closer than I would have ventured, with my life depending on the mental reactions under the dirty turban of a Sikh gun-boy. But there was someone closer to the royal family than young Simons.

Out from back of a clump of bamboo stepped the ragged man. He paused, made his familiar gesture to the heavens and walked straight to the great rock. All through the group of lions he circulated, continually crossing their line of vision and passing within inches of them. They were thoroughly aware of Frank's party and were pretending to ignore it in the lordly way they do, particularly when they have just dined well. Their awareness of it was indicated by barely perceptible movements of their heads and sly glances from their cold eyes, but the presence of the ragged man just did not register at all. To them, he simply was not there.

Ike Morehouse cleared his throat, shuffled his feet and sighed. Pick was far down in his chair, a black scowl on his puckish face. I glanced over at Featherstone and was astonished to see that he was not looking at the screen at all. He was peering back into the darkness under the small balcony where Van Toon sat alone. I could

hear Guy's steady stentorious breathing and I wondered what he was thinking.

Now we were in gorilla country. Gnarled, twisted trees festooned with moss; bamboo and giant wild celery; tall grass and scrub trees laced by creepers and rank vines into a dense mat of jungle. A muddy trail led up past a devastated area where the big apes had been feeding and through a small glade filled with their deserted nests. In the denser jungle the trail became a tunnel that led to a clearing of bamboo clumps. The shadowy forms of the feeding gorillas could be seen in every clump.

The camera stopped directly in front of a particularly thick growth and for a full fifteen seconds nothing happened. Then—very slowly—two enormous black hands parted the bamboo stalks—wider—wider—and suddenly a huge black enamelled face fringed with short black hair scowled murderously through the opening. The six hundred pound pot-bellied horror grasped some overhead creepers and arose on his stumpy legs. He opened his terrible mouth and screamed at the camera group; beat his distended chest, whirled, dropped to all fours and disappeared in the bamboo.

Another fifteen seconds and again, very slowly, two hands parted the bamboo. They were white hands. Scratched, dirty and discolored—but white.

The next instant he was standing before us, distinct and life-size and I stared up at a gentle, ravaged face and into the saddest pair of eyes I have ever seen. They went straight to my old heart and made me feel like hell. Who in the name of God was this strange—this incredible man?

A dreadful sound came from the back of the theatre, like some great animal gasping.

The house lights flashed on.

Eskimo Ike jerked his head around. "There's something wrong with Van Toon," he said.

Pick was the nearest, being on the aisle. He leaped out of his chair and sprinted up the incline. But quick as he was, the beefy Mr. Featherstone reached the stricken man before he did.

"Here fellers," called Pick, "slippy."

No good. All the haste in the world can't stay the Finger of God.

Guy Van Toon was dead.

All the years of his life he had thumbed his nose at Death in every conceivable guise and here he was, prosaically dead, in a comfortable chair in his Club after looking at a movie. Kismet.

Ike slipped out and quietly picked up the Club Manager and Janney. Somebody fetched Doctor Cornet from the taproom.

The Doc was not surprised.

"Guy was fifty years old," he said when he rose to his feet and tucked away his steth, "his heart was a hundred and fifty. I ordered him to quit three years ago. Does he do it? No. He hauls off and tries to climb to the roof of the world. The high altitudes of the Hindu Kush finished him. So it goes."

Janney rustled a camp cot from the storage room and we carried Guy Van Toon to his room and arranged him decently on his bed.

By telepathic agreement, Pick, Ike, young Simons, Featherstone and myself returned to the little theatre.

Again Pick locked the door. "We still don't want anyone else in here," he said, "until we get a few things straightened out between ourselves. Frank, who is that man?"

"I never knew him," said Frank, looking at his finger tips. This was a palpably evasive answer and Pick turned harsh.

"I never knew him," repeated Frank stubbornly. He looked a very sick boy. "There were Mruni, my Sikh gun-bearer, two pygmies, ten East Coast black boys and myself. There was no other white man in my party. There was no other safari in all that country at that time. The nearest white men were the Fathers at Lulenga Mission House. No natives we encountered ever saw that man. I never saw him."

"What do you try to tell me?" blazed Pick. "You never saw him."

Frank lowered himself into a chair and pressed his palms to his temples. "There was no such man there. I never saw him until I developed that strip of film. I almost went nuts trying to figure it out. That's why I had to show it to Henry."

After a bit Pick raised his eyes and stared bleakly at Featherstone.

"You knew him, Mr. Featherstone?"

"Yes. I knew him." The man from Nairobi's foggy voice was as impersonal as his broad face. "His name was Phillips Cord. We came out on the same boat when I was first detailed to Kenya Colony five years ago. Delightful chap. Ethnologist. He was for studying the pygmies of the Itura Forest in the Belgian Congo, so he threw in with Mr. Van Toon who was going that way after gorilla. It was Cord's first safari and his last. He tumbled into a deep, rocky donga up Mount Mikeno way and they buried him on the spot. Very regrettable business. A year ago there were rumors. A black boy got drunk in Mombasa and talked—of a quarrel one night when the camp presumably slept; of a blow with the heavy butt of a sjambok; of a slender body, already dead, being carried by a powerful man through a torrential rain and tossed into a donga. Sticky story what?"

"Powerful friends in London. Pressure applies. I was told to take over. Rather hopeless. Time lapse. Drunken blackamoor and so on. Then one day, young Frank here, turns up in Nairobi with this—uh—" he cleared his throat loudly several times, "—this infernal puzzle picture. Checked up on Mr. Van Toon's whereabouts. Found out he was due back in New York. Decided to look him up and put a few questions to him, so I came along with young Frank."

"Just who are you, Mr. Featherstone?" asked Pick.

"I take care of certain matters for Government House, Captain Pickering."

"I see. The local C. I. D." Pick sat down and grunted hopelessly. I could read his mind. A fine tradition smeared; a bronze memorial plaque with bar sinister; the miasma of scandal drifting for the first time through the corridors of the Last Horizon Club.

Silence. We all looked expectantly at the man from Nairobi, but he showed no inclination to defrost the situation and then Pick jumped to his feet, snapped his fingers irritably and jabbed at the projection booth.

"Frank, run that reel off again. Fellers, take your seats. Watch closely."

Frank went up the steps like a man in a trance.

Again the little theatre darkened and we were back at the waterhole by the lovely mimosas. On we trekked vicariously following the camera, leaving behind the placid oryx, the wildebeeste, the zebra; past the thorn trees and the browsing giraffe; into the reedy donga, warily skirting the statuesque lions; through the matted jungle, the flattened bamboo debris, the deserted nests; up the tunnel trail to the bamboo thicket silhouetted by the feeding gorillas; and all the while a lurking fear deep in some unused compartment of my brain was emerging and pressing to the front. A primitive panic slipped the leash of civilized will-power and for the first time in my life my scalp prickled.

Not at what I saw—but at what I *didn't* see.

My runaway mind seized on a fragment of silly doggerel that fitted exactly.

"The man who wasn't there," wasn't there again.

The house lights came on and killed off the white square on the screen.

I took a quick look around. Featherstone was leaning far forward, gripping the arms of his chair. I could not see his face. Eskimo Ike looked like a gaffed fish. Pick was on his feet, fists balled up. "Now by the Ninety-nine Names of God," he roared, "what kind of monkey business is this? Frank. What's become of Phillips Cord?"

No answer. "Hoy, Frank?"

Pick grimaced and streaked it up to the projection booth. In a few seconds he slapped back the sliding panel.

"Walter, gimme a hand. He's sick."

We eased young Simons down from the booth that helped him into my room, which was nearest. Ike hustled off to the taproom after Doc Cornet and Janney. Doc made a face when he examined the boy and told Janney to phone the garage for his car. He glared at us suspiciously. "You birds are not experimenting with any hokus-pokus in there, are you?"

We assured him we were not, but I could see that he was far from convinced. "I dunno," he said coldly, "two casualties in one party? I suggest we don't have any more."

Janney returned with Doc's bag of magic and we were run out.

Automatically we all turned back to the theatre, which by this time was definitely not my favorite spot. Pick, Ike and Featherstone stood silent under the balcony while I reeled off the bewitched film once more. Through the peep-hole I saw just what I expected to see—no more. Another movie of African wild life, exceptionally well done. No eerie, imploring figure troubled my uneasy eye.

I slipped the spool of film out of the projector, turned off the juice and came down. Before I left the booth I searched it. I did not find what I was looking for.

"Well, fellers," said Pick brusquely, "who do we talk to about all this?"

"You mean, to *whom* to we tell *what*," corrected Ike.

"Let's drop the whole ghastly business right here," I hastened to say and immediately felt like a juvenile conspirator.

Mr. Featherstone's monocle slipped out and fell to the limit of its ribbon. I'll take oath I glimpsed life in that pale eye. "Righto. Why not?" he said. "What's to be gained by surmise? I don't know what you gentlemen have in mind. I can only report to the Colonial Office that Mr. Van Toon died suddenly before I had a chance to interrogate him. I imagine that will end the matter."

Pick drew a prodigious breath, hooked Mr. Featherstone's arm in his and led off to the taproom. We got there none too soon as far as I was concerned.

The next day, Doc Cornet removed young Simons to a convalescent home near Atlantic City. "The lad's overdone it," he bulletined the Club, "he's got to take a long rest."

Several nights later we got Mr. Featherstone aboard the Queen Mary just in time. He was loaded down to the Plimsoll's mark with expensive beers, wines and liquors. He was also as sober as the Archbishop of Canterbury and as communicative as a totem pole at any mention of the weird film. And so the matter stands.

Eskimo Ike Morehouse is as superstitious as an orthodox Hindoo. He is profoundly wrought up over the affair. He accepts it as a true manifestation of the supernatural and is firmly convinced he has the right answer. A very simple one. Psychic photography. One up for the spiritualists. He maintains that young Simons is highly psychic—maybe unconsciously so. That one day, out in that lonely, sombre country, Frank's intense occult magnetism attracted the wandering, earthbound spirit of the murdered Cord and imprisoned it in his camera. This "prisoner in the bokkis" idea is the superstition that almost cost Martin and Osa Johnson their heads in the Big Numbers country in New Guinea some years back. The narrowest escape they ever had. He says that the death of Van Toon from sheer fright cancelled the blood debt and immediately Cord's appeased spirit slipped away to some far star to begin another in carnation.

The iconoclastic Pickering is just as positive we were witnesses to an uncommonly cold-blooded and extra-legal Third Degree. A performance remotely akin to the French Sureté's grisly trick, "the reconstruction of results. In this case a fatal one. Not that the crime," and productive of the same Van Toon didn't deserve it and that it was an easy out for all concerned.

"Psychic phenomenon my foot," he shouts when the whiskey bites him, "damned hanky-panky with a camera and two rolls of film. That's what it was. All concocted and directed by that human fish Mister Henry Ruddy Featherstone with young Frank's half-hearted assistance."

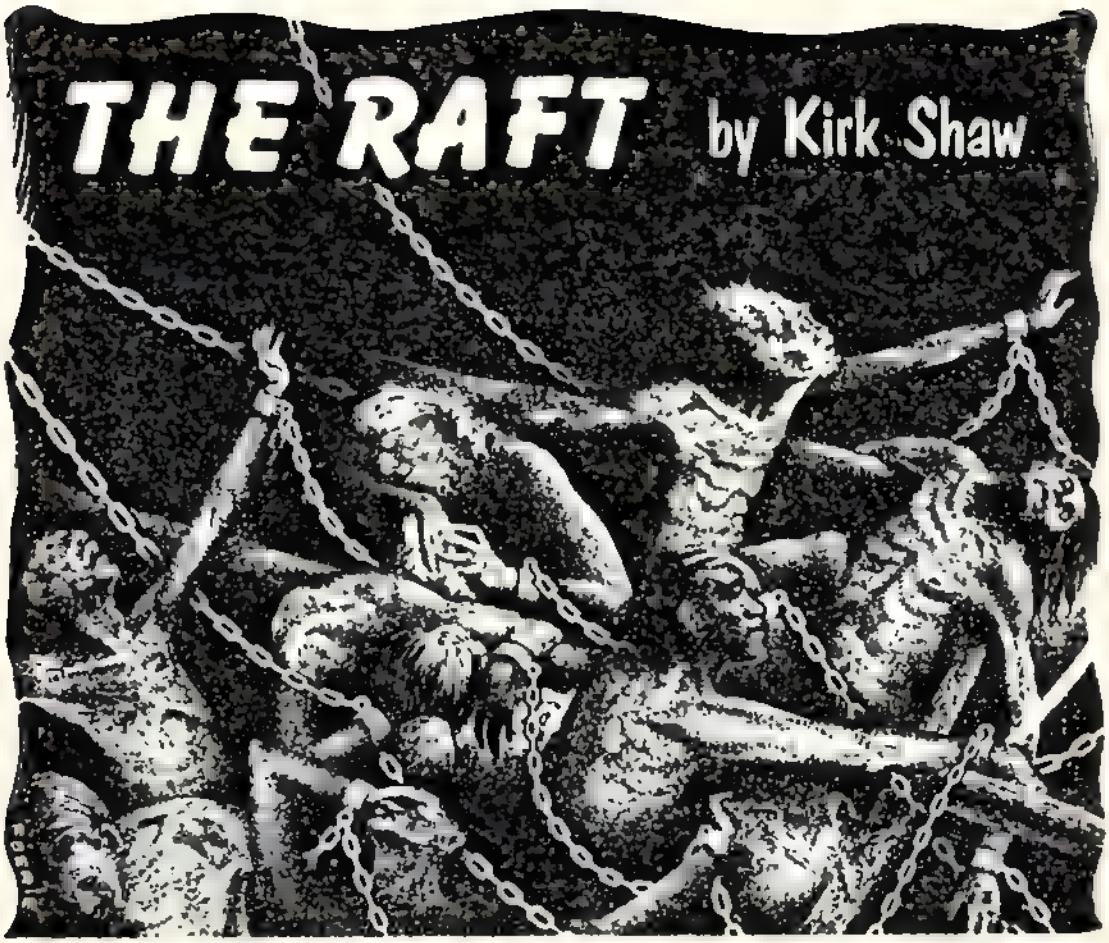
When I remind him that I searched carefully and failed to find a second film and that we all knew that Frank had no such thing on his person and also that a spool of film is neither a half dollar nor the Jack of Spades, he snorts, "Walter—Houdini made an elephant disappear from the stage of the old Hippodrome. Frank had ample time in the confusion to dispose of it. Complete nervous breakdown eh? Righto."

When I try to make the point that Phillips Cord had been dead nearly five years before Frank made those pictures, he flaps an indifferent paw and says, "stand-ins—look-alikes—doubles—whatever it is they call those fellers. Done every day."

What do I think of it?

I've spent most of my life in that dark, brooding land.

I don't think I'll go on record.



Out of the heat it floated, bearing the fruits of a fearsome curse.

WE WERE one day's steaming north of Jabal-at-Tair at the southern end of the Red Sea when we first saw the raft drifting slowly on the deep breathing waters, conspicuous on the empty sea as a solitary tea leaf on the congealing surface of a cooling teacup.

Three hours previously the Chief had told us we would have to stop to enable them to carry out some repairs below, and in that time we had all acquired some idea of what purgatory was going to be like. From overhead the blistering sun blazed down unhindered from the cloudless sky and reflected in an agonizing glare from the sheet smooth sea. In the cabins there was no respite to be found from the heated air that turned them into untenantable sweat boxes and drove us back on deck to the partial shade of the bleached awnings, where sprawled listlessly, our bodies gleamed and glistened with sweat, like sugar babies melting in a confectioner's window.

After the unnerving monotony of the shimmering sea it was a relief to watch this tiny dot that slowly bobbed toward us. At first it was but an idle interest for the bare planking showed it to be derelict, but when it became obvious that the drift was going to carry it close to us, first one person, then another moved to the bulwark rail and watched its progress.

On the bridge the Second Mate trained his binoculars, curious to know if it was

Heading by Joseph Eberle

some crude native craft or a more finished product lost from some steamer, with perhaps some useful lifesaving gear on board. After a moment he raised his voice and hailed one of the watch on deck.

"Roberts! See if you can land the small grapnel on that raft and bring it alongside. There's something lying on it that looks like a bundle or package."

AT THE third cast the sharp pronged grapnel hooked itself on the dry planking, and as the raft was hauled alongside a seaman climbed down a pilot ladder and boarded it, passed a heaving line round the package and sent it on board to the Mate who untied and opened its wrappings. These proved to be just an old, tattered and torn shirt, tied by the arms around a dilapidated ledger whose warped covers and stained pages indicated its immersion in water.

The book was taken to the Captain, and our curiosity, unsatisfied and unlikely to be enlightened, we drifted back to what shade we could find, too exhausted with the heat to even discuss what the book might contain. But that evening, after we had got under way again, the Captain sent for me.

"Come in Sparks," he called in answer to my knock." There's something I'd like you to do for me before we reach Aden."

I noded silently, wondering what was coming now, for the sultry night was not one for working in, but my interest quickened when he lifted a book from his knees and I saw it was the one from the raft.

"You saw this coming aboard, Sparks? Well, what's written here makes rather a terrible story. It may be a hoax, but somehow I don't think so, yet if it's true—" He left his sentence unfinished, then recalled himself with a start. "Anyway, I'd like you to take the book to your cabin and try to type out a copy of what's been written. The writing's a bit difficult at first but you'll soon get the hang of it, and once we can read it through without stopping and stumbling over a word, we'll have a better idea what to make of it."

Consumed with curiosity I did as I was bid, and the following is what I read on that sticky night in the Red Sea. The writing was in English, but with a curious, almost old fashioned style at times that made it difficult to guess at the writer's nationality. Never very legible it became more and more difficult to make out, and gave the impression of having been written over a considerable period, as without preamble it began.

I START this journal in my solitude to aid me forget the continual pains, and in the hope that whover may find it will pray for my soul and know pity for one of the accursed of God.

How He Whom I mocked and forsook must smile contemptuously at my plea for mercy. I who have never shown mercy myself and who turned a deaf ear on the anguished cries of those in my power.

My sole remaining hope is that by my story I may prevent others from following in my footsteps, and thus gain some mitigation of my torment.

None are left who will mourn me so my name is unimportant, sufficient that my skin was white and my homeland far from this antechamber of Hell. In my youth I was neither better nor worse than my companions, but avarice and greed changed me from that to one of the vilest of men.

An engineer by profession I was working in Port Sudan when I first heard of the easy money that was to be made by anyone unscrupulous and daring enough to exploit it. With a little capital and a disregard for the sufferings of others, the money was there, and with these unworthy qualifications I was well suited so I threw up my job and traveled to Massawa.

Arriving there, after careful and guarded inquiries, I approached an Arab merchant of unsavory reputation, but known to have an interest in several of the dhows that lay in the harbor. His price for selling one was high, but when I had finally convinced him that my means were limited I became the owner of one of these ungainly craft. Through him I was also put in touch with Yussuf who was to become my right hand man and partner in treachery.

Yussuf was ideal for the purpose I had in mind. A great strong rogue, half Arab half Negro, fear was unknown to him and money his only god. Always at his waist he wore a

wickedly curved knife which recently he had used too often, and which had brought unwelcome police attention to him. But more important from my point of view, he knew the waters around the thousand islands like the palm of his hand. With his assistance I picked out the two villainous wrecks from the Kafba who were to act as our crew, and together we set out to make, and made our fortunes.

OUR trade was the vilest but most profitable of all, our cargo human freight; picturesquely named Black Ivory, it was simply slave running. Stamped out in Europe it still flourishes in all its old viciousness in this forsaken corner of the world where human life is cheap, and authority willing but too weak to combat the traders. In return for a little risk, money was to be made from the sale of human beings. Men for toil and menial tasks degrading to their manhood, and women, especially if young and attractive, for the harems of petty chiefs. A trade as old as the hills, but still as lucrative as ever.

Like all sin it was easy. At nights we would sail silently into a prearranged bay on the deserted Eritrian coast to meet the slave caravans from the interior. Bargaining was carried out on the spot, and when agreement had been reached, the slaves were herded on board with rawhide whips and battened down in the holds.

Before the next dawn we would sail, out across the straits to Yemen where the slaves would be taken off our hands with no awkward questions asked, and another handsome profit would be split between us.

So it went on, year after year with our luck holding good and never a sign of one of the few police patrols that might have meant our finish. How I wish to God now that we had been caught; but no, we were destined for more terrible ends.

On our last voyage we met with the Arabs as usual, and after the bargaining we were preparing to take on board fifty-two poor black wretches, each securely shackled and fettered to his neighbor, when my attention was suddenly attracted to one of them—a young girl.

Despite the chains her carriage was graceful, as steadying an elderly man who tottered with weariness beside her, she walked towards me. With her head held proudly she seemed more like some haughty young queen than one doomed to the misery of slavery, and the contempt in her eyes when her glance met mine shamed my very soul and roused the brutal desire to break her fine young spirit.

I watched closely as she crossed the narrow planking to the hot wooden deck. Never had we carried such a fine black pearl. The single sari like garment she wore could not conceal the slender hips and thighs, and accentuated the soft curves of her figure. Her long black hair, unusually long for a native, mantled her shoulders in smooth, glossy waves. Her features were clear cut and attractive to western eyes, and her brown skin velvet as any peach.

Such was my curiosity that I questioned one of the slavers about her, although previously some last lingering spark of humanity had kept me from ever inquiring where these poor devils had come from.

According to the Arab, the girl and the elderly man with her were related though he did not know how closely. All he could say was that they came from a village on the fringe of Abyssinia where the man had acted as an administrator for the Emperor. Her fine features were thus explained, for the nobility of her race was renowned since the Queen of Sheba.

The man had been a dabbler in the mysteries of black magic, and had so enraged the local witchdoctors that they had bargained with the arabs and then lured their victims into the forest, and the waiting slavers. Then not all his cunning nor her tears had saved them from the fate of the leg-irons.

Meanwhile, their betrayers would have caused the word to be spread around that the beasts of the night had killed and devoured them both—we were the beasts of the night, but we lacked the mercy that makes the savage kill at once.

Before the dawn we sailed. Our human freight were packed in the bowels of the dhow, well away from the curious eyes on any passing ship we might chance to meet, and so hardened were we to the suffering

we caused that no one even noticed the muffled cries of anguish that came from the depths as the heat of the sun intensified.

That evening, with Yussuf and his whip beside me, I went down among them.

The girl sat huddled in a far corner, her arm around the man who lay with his head supported on her firm breasts. As I held my oil lamp aloft, she raised a hand to shield her eyes from the dazzle which even that poor light caused after the blackness of the hold, and by its flickering glare Yussuf brutally kicked the man aside. Stooping, he unlocked the fetters from around the girl's ankle, and she cringed back as I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her upright, anxious to get away from the loathsome stench of the place.

Sick though he was, when the man realized my intentions he howled like a wounded animal and flung himself bodily at me. His chains brought him up short and the loaded stock of Yussuf's whip thudded soggily across his face, sending him spinning to the deck at my feet. The girl whimpered and tried to get to his crumpled form, but I tightened my grip on her wrist and hauled her back while the native slowly raised his head and stared at me.

Streaked with blood and dirt, by the fitful light of the lantern, he looked like a devil incarnate rising from the dark depths of Hell. Never have I seen a look so malignant as his lips writhed hatefully and a meaningless jumble poured from them.

But it was his eyes I feared. Those piercing, unblinking, hate consumed eyes that seemed to bore deep into my skull.

Shuddering, I hastened from their sight, pulling the weeping girl roughly along with me. Then aft, in the hovel I used as a cabin, I threw her on the pallet bed and doused the reeking oil lamp.

The following morning I was awake with the dawn, but the girl had already awakened before me, if indeed she had slept at all. Her face was drawn and tear stained, but not one sound did she utter as with loathing and hate in her eyes she watched me. I cursed her loudly and went on deck.

On these runs, providing there were no ships around, it had been our custom to allow the slaves on deck for a brief five minutes. Not from any sense of humanity, but because dead slaves meant only lost money. This morning was no exception, and I seated myself on one of the bollards to watch the shuffling wretches being herded along by Yussuf and one of the crew.

When the Abyssinian came on deck his eyes immediately sought mine and never for one moment did they relax their baleful glare as he limped along.

Suddenly, just as he was passing me, he kicked out savagely and the fetters fell from his legs as he threw himself at me.

Somehow during the night he had picked the lock that had imprisoned him, then cunningly replacing the steel band around his ankle had awaited this moment.

But I had no time to consider this now. Already his long bony talons were dug agonizingly into my throat, and caught in a half risen position I reeled back until the low bulwark caught the small of my back and I was bent over the shark infested waters.

Back and back he forced me, his fetid breath clogging my nostrils, his legs locked around mine. Frantically I pulled my revolver clear and clubbed at his head and face until with a grunt he relaxed his grip. Mad with fear I hit again and again as he slumped against me before he finally collapsed on the deck, a dark stream of blood oozing from his battered features and staining the bleached planking around his still, ungainly form.

Gasping for breath I staggered upright, my hand seeking my bruised throat. It was all over in a minute that had seemed a lifetime, and now Yussuf was kneeling by his side and rolling him over.

"He's dead!" he announced, and I cursed, for I had not meant to hit so hard, but stark fear knows no reason.

To cover my terror I shouted angrily at the two sailors, and silently they bent to pick up the body by head and heels while the other slaves, wild eyed but cowed were driven below by Yussuf.

With two or three swings to gain momentum the sailors let go, and the body arched through the air to hit the water as the black triangular fins swept in.

A piercing scream brought me sharply round. The girl, one hand pressed to her mouth and horror on her face, was standing in the doorway of the cabin, a witness of all that had happened.

I moved towards her, but before I could get near, she darted forward and sprang lightly onto the side. For a moment she swayed, her head turned and staring straight at me, then before any of us could get near her she jumped—right in the middle of those dark, thrashing bodies.

Stunned, I stood rooted to the spot. And when my unwilling legs carried me to the side all I could see was the fighting sharks.

Screaming and raging I emptied my revolver at the monsters; but she was gone.

The shock and horror of that day I tried to dissolve in spirits and by the afternoon I was completely drunk and maudlin. The death scene of the girl and the old man's eyes haunted and tormented me until I was babbling and laughing insanely. At last I shouted for Yussuf, and when he appeared, demanded to know what the man had said on the previous night as he lay in that stinking hold.

Yussuf hesitated, and slowly I realized that for the first time since we had formed our unholy alliance he was afraid. His fear communicated itself to me, and I raved and ranted at him. His eyes narrowed, and I groped drunkenly for my revolver, but with an effort he regained his control.

"He cursed you, white man. Cursed you with all the hatred in his shrivelled body. Rotten!—he said. Rotten you were and rotten you would die. The black soul in your white body would corrupt before the grave had closed over your head, and the worms of corruption would feed on your flesh before your rotten heart had ceased to beat. The misery you brought in life to others would heap a hundredfold on your own head. A man but not a man. One of the living dead, held in the clammy hand of the grave!"

When Yussuf stopped I howled and tugged again at my gun, but in two strides he was by my side and his great hand closed over mine. I was not a weak man, but he imprisoned my fingers as I might hold a struggling sparrow.

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed, shoving his bearded face close to mine. "I was not the one who cursed you, and we may need each other soon—the Kharif is coming!"

The Kharif! Dreaded sandstorm of this inland sea. Dangerous at any time, but deadly to us in the close waters around the reefs and islands where we were now sailing.

Even in my pitiful state, Yussuf's news penetrated and had a partial sobering effect on me. And two hours later when I staggered on deck the worst effects of the alcohol had worn off.

Already the gray cloud of the sandstorm had climbed across the sun, turning the white hot orb into an inflamed ulcer in the darkening sky. The wind was increasing in strength, but it brought no coolness with it. A warm gritty wind that seemed to spew from the mouth of a blast furnace—and then the sand struck us.

Many of these Devil's storms have I seen but never have I known such a demon.

EVERYTHING was blotted out as the stinging, blinding, particles engulfed the dhow in a solid gray blanket. Sand forced its way in everywhere, gritting between our teeth. Stinging and inflaming the eyes, and fouling every breath we drew.

I could not see beyond the length of my arm as I stumbled towards the tiller from where I could hear Yussuf's voice rising above even the roar of the storm as he bellowed instructions at the sailors who were struggling to lower the great patchwork sail. But even as I reached him the sail ripped and shredded from peak to foot, and the tattered canvas whipped around us.

Yussuf was throwing all his great weight on the tiller, trying to bring the dhow's head us to meet the full fury of the wind, for it would have been suicide to try and run blind before it. I added my weight to his and slowly she started to feel the helm.

From below decks came a wail of fear from the slaves as we heeled over. Then, with a splintering crash we struck!

The tall wooden mast rived and toppled—down it crashed with the crack of splintering timber and shattered the heavy tiller—under it, squashed like a beetle, lay Yussuf!

The dhow lurched on her beam ends.

The wail of the slaves became the shriek of the damned as the water boiled in. The tattered sail slipped overboard, and round my ankle a trailing guy tightened painfully. Screaming with agony as the sodden canvas threatened to pull my leg from the groin I clung desperately to the shattered rudder post. My hands slipped, and slithering across the sloping deck my head struck some object, a thousand lights flashed before my eyes, and I was overboard, unconscious.

Perhaps the rough seas saved me from the sharks, I'll never know, but when I regained my senses I was lying on the sharply shelving beach of a small island. Of my late companions and captives, I saw no more—they at least had not suffered long.

THE Kharif had blown itself out, and I dragged my battered and bruised body to the shade of an overhanging cliff to escape the murderous heat of the sun. All I could see of my past life were some pieces of broken boarding awash in the surf, part of the torn sail caught on a rock, and this book lying in a shallow pool.

When my strength had sufficiently returned, I hauled the flotsam higher on the beach and set out to explore the island.

As far as I could discover, in circumference it was little over a mile; a bare peak of rock rising sheer from the sea without so much as a blade of grass to relieve its harsh uniformity. Laboriously I climbed and scrambled over ever inch of it, searching desperately for some sign of water, for without it I could not hope to survive long in the blistering heat. But not one drop could I find; when exhausted I returned to the narrow beach I had landed on. There I crawled into a cave-like fissure in the hard rock and lay down to die in the dark.

But presently, as I stretched out and mused on the value of my fortune now, I thought I heard a faint drip. Intently, but with little hope, I strained my ears.

Again I heard it! A slow monotonous drip, but steady as a metronome that sent me scrambling madly deeper into the cave. And there I found it—water! A shallow pool formed by the drippings that came through a crack in the roof. God knows where it started, for since that day I've searched the island repeatedly and can find no trace of its source, but though just a dirty brownish puddle whose overflow disappeared into the bowels of the earth, it tasted like nectar to my parched throat as I lay on my belly and lapped the brackish water.

The pool was shallow, and all too soon I finished its meager supply, and though I cut and scrapped my tongue licking at the bare stone only patience could refill my pitcher.

Heartened by my discovery I set forth once more, this time to seek for food. But all I could find were a few small fish trapped in a rocky pool; had I but known it, in time I was to be thankful for what I could find beneath the heavy stones.

I had no means of telling exactly where I was but I knew I was far from the shipping lanes, and my only hope would be to build some type of raft and by moving in easy stages try to reach the mainland or one of the islands with a police post.

Setting to work on the salvage from the dhow I managed to make a crude kind of catamaran with a broken spar serving as a paddle. Then just when I was ready to set out came fresh disaster. I discovered I had nothing in which to carry water, and I knew how unlikely I was to find any on the other islands.

I could not escape by sea, and all that was left was the slight chance that some steamer off her course might see and rescue me.

To attract attention I tied my tattered shirt to the spar and stuck it upright on the highest part of the island, but though occasionally I saw the smoke of distant steamers, none ever hove in view or came near enough to see my distress signal.

SLOWLY the dreary days dragged past and I marked their passage by scratching a stroke on the rock face. When three weeks had thus gone by my reckoning, I was awakened one night by the first of the pains. Deep in my innards it started, a gnawing constant pain like a small fire trying to burn its way out. My life became a burden to me. At nights I couldn't sleep, and by day my food would not lie in my shrunken stomach.

Steadily the pains spread through my whole body until I was just one living mass

of agony. Sores appeared, disgusting, sickening sores that would not heal but spread and spread. My hair dropped out; my teeth went rotten—the curse had come true!

Corruption had started before the grave had closed over my head and I became a walking lump of repulsiveness, nauseated by my own existence.

Now I knew I could never leave this island, for no one could ever again bear to look at me. I was one of the walking dead and the island my tomb. I brought down my flag, and finding a stump of a pencil in the pocket of the shirt, thought of writing this chronicle so that if my bones were found, the story of my death would be known.

Since I started writing the cancer of my flesh has continued until I am barely able to hold the pencil, and a new idea has occurred to me.

To ensure I shall never leave this island, I am going to push off my raft and let it drift where the current wills, and on it I shall put this history.

Beyond me as I write, I can see the dark fins of cruising sharks, if I thought that even they would not be too disgusted to touch me I would finish this miserable existence here and now.

But no! I must live out the curse.

"The black soul in your white body will corrupt before the grave has closed over your head. The worms of corruption will feed on your flesh before your rotten heart has ceased to beat. The misery you brought in life to others will heap an hundredfold on your own head. A man but not a man. One of the living dead, held in the clammy hand of the grave!"

Oh, reader, if you have any mercy in your soul, then pray for my early death. I have sinned, but I have suffered an hundredfold. The man and the girl are revenged.

THERE is the story as I read it.

Is it true, is there a man dragging out that living death on some lonely island in the Red Sea?

Or is the whole thing just a cruel hoax?

I'll never know, thank God.

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Reminiscent of "The Pit and the Pendulum."

Mrs. Penleath's Stratagem

BY T. W. SPEIGHT

IT WAS in the dusk of an October afternoon that Austin Goodreeve alighted from an omnibus at Piccadilly Circus. There had been a heavy shower recently, and the pavements were still sloppy. The shops were being lighted up one after another, and minute by minute a lengthening fringe of flame punctuated the semi-darkness of the streets as the lamplighter passed swiftly on his rounds.

Earlier in the afternoon Goodreeve had landed from an Australian liner at Tilbury. After depositing his one small portmanteau in the railway cloak-room, he had set out for the West End, drawn hither by an impulse he was powerless to control; and now, here he was at the well-remembered Circus which he had seen last in the flesh four years before, but had seen many a time since in his waking dreams.

And yet as he stood there for a few moments, debating with himself in which direction he should turn, he hardly looked like a man who had ever been familiar with the West End of London. His frayed serge suit and soft felt hat both bore traces of long service, while his boots were palpably down at heel. He was wearing a white flannel shirt with a small sailor tie. He had clear-cut, regular features, boldly marked eyebrows, and rather fine eyes. One of his first cares on reaching town had been to have his hair, short beard, and mustache trimmed and attended to.

Mechanically he turned westward, and strolled slowly along. It fell in with his morbid humor to lounge and stare about him, and to be taken by the jostling crowd for the shabby loafer he felt himself to be. Three young men in evening dress, and smoking cigarettes, passed him. They were on their way to look in for an hour at the club before dinner. He glanced after them with a smile which was compounded of bitterness, envy and pity; for only little more than four years before he himself had been one of the gilded youths of the West End, and, in the light of all he had gone through since, what an empty and futile life it seemed; which by no means implied that he did not enjoy it at the time.

At the door of some fashionable tea-rooms he came to an abrupt halt, overcome for the moment by a certain recollection. They were the very rooms to which he had piloted Stella Winston after a theater matinée that afternoon when they met for the last time. And how nice she had been to him that afternoon! Who could have conceived that so fair an exterior hid so mercenary a heart?

In another moment he would have passed

on, when a miniature brougham drew up, from which a fashionably attired young woman alighted, and was on the point of entering the tea-rooms when her glance fell carelessly on Goodreeve, who was standing full in the lamplight, and on the instant she started back, and one hand went up quickly to her heart.

"Surely you are Harry Dacre!" she exclaimed, with a catch in her voice. "Where have you been all this long time?"

"You are under a misapprehension, madam," replied Goodreeve, as he raised his shabby hat. "I am not the person you take me for."

"Is it possible that I have been mistaken? I made sure that in you I had lighted on my Cousin Harry, who disappeared six years ago, and has not been heard of since. Your likeness to him is most extraordinary. I can but ask you to pardon my blunder."

Goodreeve bowed. "There is nothing to pardon," he murmured.

The Unknown did not pass on, but seemed to be taking in his appearance from top to toe.

"I trust you won't be offended," she said, "by my remarking that, for a gentleman, you seem to be in rather low water."

Goodreeve smiled bitterly. "I am in very low water. Three hours ago I landed from an Australian liner with just eighteen and sixpence in my pocket."

"Is that indeed so?" She seemed to consider for a few moments, a finger on her lips. "Your circumstances being unfortunately such as they are, it is possible, Mr.—"

"My name is Austin Goodreeve."

"It is possible, Mr. Goodreeve, that you would not object to do me a slight service in return for a twenty-pound note?"

He was not in the least offended. Why should he be? She evidently regarded him as a poor beggar to whom a twenty-pound note would be a godsend; which it certainly would be. He answered gravely:

"I shall esteem it an honor, madam, to place my services, such as they are, at your disposal."

"How can I thank you sufficiently? But it is impossible to explain here. You must come and dine with me. My flat is not more than a mile away. You will come, will you not?"

As she spoke she crossed to the brougham. For answer Goodreeve opened the door. "Home," she said to the coachman. Then she got in, and Goodreeve followed her without a word, and shut the door. "Adventures are to the adventurous," he told himself. "Happen what may, I will see this thing through."

FOUR years before a lawyer's rascality had robbed Austin Goodreeve of the fifty thousand pounds bequeathed him by his father, and within a week of the fact being made public his promised wife jilted him. Sick of England, he determined, with the wreck of his fortune, to try his luck at the Antipodes.

Well, he did try it, with the unfortunate result that at the end of three and a half years he had just enough funds left to carry him back to Sydney and pay for a steerage passage home.

The brougham drove on through the lamp-lighted streets. Goodreeve felt as if he were enacting a *rôle* in some fantastic dream-drama from which he should presently awake and find himself—he knew not where. The faint, delicious perfume of the Unknown's presence was about him; the magic of her personality held him as with a spell. They had left the bustle and glare of Piccadilly behind them before she broke the silence.

"You have told me your name," she said, "and there is no reason why you should not be told mine, which is Ida Penleath. I am married, but am living apart from my husband. We could not hit it off together, and consequently deemed it wiser to separate—but here we are at my humble domicile."

The brougham came to a stand as she spoke. Goodreeve alighted, and then helped his companion to do the same. He could just make out that he was at the entrance to a large building, which he rightly conjectured to consist of a number of flats. Next moment the door was opened by the janitor, and he followed Mrs. Penleath into the hall. On the far side was a lift, toward which she led the way.

A minute later they stepped out of the lift on to a landing on the third floor.

"My companion has gone to a concert this evening, so that we shall be alone, and can

talk unreservedly," remarked Mrs. Penleath, with a smile.

With that she crossed to one of the doors and pressed the electric button. At once the door was opened by a youth in livery, and Goodreeve followed his conductress into a charmingly furnished apartment, with two other doors opening out of it. "Dinner will be served in three-quarters of an hour," remarked Mrs. Penleath. Then she said something in a low voice to the page, who thereupon disappeared.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Penleath proceeded in leisurely fashion to take off her outdoor things and deposit them on a couch, chatting inconsequentially as she did so, and not seeming to notice her companion's monosyllabic replies. Then the page reappeared. "If you will be good enough to follow Kit," she said, "you will be enabled to arrange your toilet."

By no means loth was Goodreeve to do as he was requested, although, beyond indulging in a welcome ablution, there was not much that he was in a position to do. What, then, was his amazement when, on following the page into an elegantly appointed bedroom the latter, indicating a dress suit, together with sundry other habiliments, laid out on the bed, said, "For your use, sir. When you want me, will you please to ring?" As he arranged his white tie half an hour later Goodreeve could not help feeling that if civilization has its drawbacks it is not without certain solacements not to be found among the back-blocks of Australia.

Mrs. Penleath clapped her hands at sight of him. "A transformation indeed!" she laughingly exclaimed. "Now you look like your proper self. But come. Dinner is laid in the next room. Of course, I need hardly tell you that I have had it brought in from a restaurant, with a man to wait on us."

She was wearing a marvelous confection of black and yellow, which set off her dusky beauty to perfection. Never, to Goodreeve's thinking, had he looked upon a more supremely lovely woman.

In the presence of the waiter and the page, nothing of a private nature could be broached, and it was not till they were left alone that Goodreeve said to himself, "The moment is at hand."

With a smile and a *"Permettez-moi,"* Ida helped herself to a cigarette. "I indulge in a mild whiff once and again. I find that it tends to soothe my nerves," she continued; "and, goodness knows, they have needed soothing of late." Then, as she struck a match, "here comes coffee. I think you will find some tolerable Benedictine in the stand, if you care for it."

"Thanks, I'm doing myself to rights," he replied. He felt as comfortable as a man ought to feel after a capital dinner and three or four glasses of sound wine. Still, he was curious to know what she had to say to him.

But it was not till she had finished her cigarette, and had flicked a speck of ash off her dress, that Mrs. Penleath spoke next.

"You know already that I have separated from my husband," she began. "I bore with his treatment as long as I could, but there came a time when I refused any longer to put up with it. When by accident I encountered you this evening, believing you to be my long-lost Cousin Harry, I cannot tell you how glad I felt, because (putting aside other considerations) I stand dreadfully in need of someone willing to go on a private errand for me, and to execute a certain confidential commission in connection therewith."

"As I have already remarked, you may command me in any way that may seem best to you," replied Goodreeve, earnestly.

"Thank you a thousand times! My instincts are rarely at fault, and from the moment I set eyes on you, I felt sure that you would help me in my need. What I should like you to do, first of all, is to convey a letter to a certain address in the suburbs, and to bring the answer back to me."

"How soon do you wish me to start?"

She glanced at the clock. "We can make ourselves comfortable for another hour," she answered, as she lighted a fresh cigarette.

And a very pleasant hour it proved to be so far as Goodreeve was concerned. Although his hostess was married, her dusky beauty had for him an allurement which he found it impossible to resist. But why should he resist it? After tonight he should probably never see her again. He would bask in her presence while he had the privilege of doing so.

But the evening wore on, and when the

clock chimed the half hour past eight, he felt compelled to say, "Is it not about time for me to set out?"

"Whenever you are ready," replied Mrs. Penleath. "I will fetch the note I want you to deliver."

He was standing with his back to the fire when she returned. She gave him the note, which was simply superscribed, "M. Poltykoff," and then pressed an electric button. Five seconds later Kit entered the room, carrying a fur-lined overcoat and an astrakhan traveling-cap.

"It is a wretchedly inclement night," remarked Mrs. Penleath, "and there is no reason why you should not make yourself as comfortable as possible."

It was a remark with which he cordially agreed; so he permitted Kit to help him on with the coat and accepted the cap at his hands. "I will accompany you to the door," remarked Mrs. Penleath. "I don't suppose that Monsieur Poltykoff will detain you many minutes, and of course you will come back direct here. I shall anxiously await your return." Then, in a lower voice, she added, "I can never, never thank you enough for the service you are rendering me!" A hansom was in waiting. Ida held out her hand. "*Au revoir*, and good luck to you," she said, as she gave Austin's fingers a warm squeeze. "The cabman has had his instructions, and has been settled with beforehand."

Hardly had the cab disappeared before two men, who seemed to spring from nowhere, met face to face opposite Riversdale Mansions, exchanged a dozen words, and then vanished again into the darkness. But Mrs. Penleath, watching from the window of a dark room, had been a witness of the coming together of the men, of their brief colloquy, and of their hurried disappearance in company. The moment she lost sight of them a deep sigh broke from her. It was like the sigh of one from whose heart a great burden has been lifted.

Goodreeve took no note of the direction in which he was being driven, and even had he done so he would have been no wiser, his knowledge of London topography being almost exclusively limited to a slice of the West End and to a few of the main city thoroughfares. Through the rain-smeared window nothing was discernible save now and again a blurred patch of yellow light as, one after another, the street lamps were left behind. But the point was one that had no interest for him. He had partaken of an excellent dinner; his fur-lined coat was deliciously comfortable; the regular beat of the horse's hoofs on the road, together with the monotonous grind of the cab wheels, formed a sort of rude rhythmic symphony not unsoothing to the ear. Goodreeve's eyes had not been five minutes shut before he was fast asleep.

He was awakened by the stoppage of the cab and the jerking up of the window. The driver got down from his perch. "Here we are, sir," he said. "This is the place I was told to drive you to."

GOODREEVE alighted. The rain was over, the clouds were dispersing, and a few watery-looking stars shone wanly in the sky. Staring about him, he could just make out that he was in what looked like a country road, with no house visible save the one opposite the entrance gate of which the cab had come to a stand. As well as he could distinguish, it was a brick-built mansion of considerable size, standing back in its own grounds. Except for a fanlight over the door, the whole front was in darkness.

Goodreeve pushed open the swing-gate and passed into the grounds. A flight of shallow steps led up to the front door. He could perceive no knocker; but there was a bell-pull at which he gave a vigorous tug, which was responded to by a faint tinkle inside the house. Hardly had the sound died away before the door was opened by an elderly man, whose beard reached nearly to his waist. His hair, parted down the middle, fell to his shoulders, while his sole visible garment was a blue gaberdine, which reached from his neck to his ankles.

"Does Monsieur Poltykoff reside here?" queried Austin.

"For the present Gospodin Poltykoff may be found here," was the roundabout reply.

"I am the bearer of a note for him, if you will be good enough to give it into his hands."

The man took the note with a lowly obeisance. "Will not the gentleman enter? He is

expected," he said, speaking with a pronounced foreign accent.

Goodreeve could not repress a start. Expected? How could that be? However, he crossed the threshold, and next moment the big door clashed behind him with an ominous sound. Without another word the man shambled off and disappeared through a door at the opposite end of the hall, which was of considerable size, and was lighted by a solitary lamp.

At the end of a couple of minutes the man reappeared, and beckoning to Goodreeve, said, "Will monsieur please to follow me?"

Thereupon he led the way down a dimly lighted corridor, at the end of which he opened wide a door, and with a low bow, motioned to Goodreeve to enter. After a moment's hesitation, the latter did so, and he was aware of the door being softly shut behind him.

At a first glance round it seemed an ordinary enough apartment in which he now found himself. Behind a big square table, littered with papers, sat a clean-shaven man of mid-age, with a strong, resolute face and very piercing eyes, who, at the moment of Goodreeve's entrance, was busily writing, but who at once put down his pen, and leaning back in his chair, eyed him keenly in silence. He was seated within the circle of light reflected by a shaded lamp in the center of the table.

Immediately behind M. Poltykoff a huge black screen, quite seven feet high, spread itself across the entire width of the floor, and while Goodreeve was staring at it the silence was broken by the sound of some one coughing behind it. A sudden chill ran through him, he could not have told why.

Presently M. Poltykoff spoke. "I am glad, Mr. Penleath—pray be seated—to find that you have seen fit to comply with the summons which, in the exercise of our duty, we have been under the necessity of serving upon you." Only by the faintest foreign accent did he betray that he was not an Englishman. "Doubtless you are prepared to—"

"One moment, sir, if you please," broke in Goodreeve, who had not availed himself of the others' invitation to be seated. "You are evidently laboring under a misapprehension. I am not Mr. Penleath, who is an entire stranger to me. My name is Austin Goodreeve." At these words, spoken in his clear, incisive tones, there reached him a low murmur of voices from behind the screen.

"Soh!" exclaimed M. Poltykoff, after a momentary pause, in a tone of polite incredulity, and with a lifting of his eyebrows. "If such is indeed the case, may I ask with what object you are here, and how you came into possession of the note—which is simply my summons enclosed in an envelope and readdressed to me—of which you were the bearer?"

"The note was given me by Mrs. Penleath, with a request to bring it here and take the answer back to her. Beyond that, I know nothing whatever of the affair."

"This is most extraordinary," replied the other, with a caustic smile. "Have you anything about you, may I ask, which will serve to verify the accuracy of your statement?"

Oblivious for the moment of the fact that the overcoat he was wearing was not his own, Goodreeve rummaged in the pockets, and from one of them brought forth a tortoise-shell card-case and a silver match-box. For a moment he stared at them in stupefaction, the next he was deftly relieved of them by a man who stepped up behind him and passed the articles on to M. Poltykoff.

The latter examined them in silence. Then, fixing Goodreeve with his keen glance, he said, "You assert that you are not Ivan Penleath, and yet in your possession are found his card-case and a match-box engraved with his monogram. *Vraiment, c'est une chose singulière!*"

"Possibly it seems so to you, and yet it can be readily explained," replied Austin. "This overcoat is Mr. Penleath's property. Being without one of my own, and the weather being such as it is, at his wife's request, I put it on before coming here."

M. Poltykoff pursed out his underlip and shook his head.

Then he took the green shade off the lamp, and opening a drawer, he took out of it a photograph, and for fully half a minute sat silently comparing it with the features of the man on the other side of the table.

It was an ordeal which stung Goodreeve

to the quick. A vague apprehension of some danger as yet unknown began to creep over him.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Penleath; I have something of grave import to say to you," remarked the Russian, presently. With that, he put back the photograph and replaced the shade over the lamp.

"I tell you, sir, as I have told you already, that I am not Ivan Penleath," was Goodreeve's passionate rejoinder.

"Enough of this child's play!" replied the other in low, stern tones. "Your ruse has failed of its purpose, as it deserved to do, and you stand detected as your proper self. Whether you have any suspicion of the reason for which you have been summoned here, of course I do not know, but I think it not unlikely that you may have. However, be that as it may, it is due to you to state as briefly as possible the charge now laid at your door, and to afford you every opportunity of disproving it, should you be in a position to do so."

He ceased, and drawing toward him some of the papers on the table, he began to look over them. Goodreeve now availed himself of the chair which had been placed for him. He was weary both in body and mind. As all protest on his part seemed useless, he would await further enlightenment before saying more.

Presently M. Poltykoff looked up from his papers. "Ivan Penleath," he said, "in the documents now before me it is charged against you, and on evidence which seems incontestable, that six months ago, when our *confrère,* Alexis Bouroffsky, was in Moscow on a secret mission, you basely betrayed him into the hands of the police; as a consequence of which he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to lifelong deportation to the island of Saghalien. If you have anything to say in refutation of the charge in question, now is your time to say it." No judge could have spoken in tones more even and unimpassioned. Goodreeve began to realize that he was in an extremely awkward fix.

"I can only affirm once more that I am not the man you assume me to be; and that, consequently, I know nothing whatever of the circumstances of which you have just made mention."

"Ivan Penleath, I warn you that you are trifling with my time and your own. Is that all you have to say?"

"What else can I say?"

"You are, of course, aware of the penalty to which, as a traitor to the Cause, you have rendered yourself liable?"

"How is it possible that I should know anything of the sort? How often am I to tell you that—"

The Russian held up his right hand. "The penalty is death!" Gravely and solemnly the words dropped from his lips.

Then from behind the screen came twelve solemn repetitions of the word "Death!" pronounced by as many different voices.

Goodreeve caught his breath with a gasp, sprang to his feet, and then sank limply back into his chair. He felt as if his blood had been turned into water.

"Now you comprehend, if you did not do so before, to what you have rendered yourself liable," resumed Poltykoff. "Do you still persist in your assertion that you are not Ivan Penleath?"

"I do," was the hoarse reply. "I assert most solemnly that Ivan Penleath is an utter stranger to me, and that my name is Austin Goodreeve."

FOR a few moments M. Poltykoff seemed lost in thought. Then he said, "I must ask you to retire for a few minutes while the Council deliberates upon your case." With that he signed to the man behind Austin, who at once advanced and touched the latter on the shoulder. At the touch he started to his feet, and for a moment his eyes looked straight into Poltykoff's. As they did so, he could not repress a shudder, so cold and merciless was the expression he read there.

Then he turned and followed the man. Outside they were joined by another man, and the two led the way down the corridor, at the end of which they turned to the left and traversed another passage till they came to a certain door, which, on being opened, disclosed a small apartment dimly lighted by a swing lamp.

"Enter, monsieur, if you please," said one of the men persuasively, "It will be for a few minutes only."

Instinctively Goodreeve drew back. "What place is this?" he asked.

But scarcely had the words left his lips before he was gently but irresistibly propelled into the room, and ere he could turn the door shut behind him with a click, and he found himself a prisoner.

So sudden and complete had been the surprise, that for a few seconds he felt mentally stunned. But soon his brain cleared, and he set himself to examine his surroundings. His tiny prison was octagonal in shape, and could not have been more than a dozen or fourteen feet in diameter. Its unplastered walls were composed of small bricks closely cemented; its floor was of slate or of some substance which resembled it; while its roof went up to a point, from which, by a chain, was suspended an oil lamp. Of furniture there was not an article of any kind. It was a strange place in which to shut any one up, were it only for the space of a few minutes.

Then came the question, For what purpose had he been shut up? Even if Penleath were the traitor he was alleged to be, that his life would necessarily have to pay the forfeit was something he, Goodreeve, declined to believe. For his part he had always classed three-fourths of what he read about the nihilists and their doings as so much sensational fiction. That in busy London, and at the close of the nineteenth century, any person or persons who might have incurred their resentment could be quietly "removed" without any stir being made about the affair, or without the perpetrators being ultimately run to earth, was what his common-sense refused to credit.

There being nothing to sit upon, he had folded his arms, and was leaning against the wall, awaiting with growing impatience the moment of his release, when he suddenly became aware of a peculiar movement of the floor on which he was standing. At once his wandering thoughts concentrated themselves, and his lounging posture was exchanged for one of tense alertness. And now, staring intently with eyes which would fain have disbelieved their own evidence, he saw that the farther side of the floor was almost imperceptibly but surely receding from the wall into which it had seemed to be firmly built, leaving an ever-widening space between the two. No sooner did he realize this as a fact than he was seized with a vertigo, which for a minute or more caused him to seek the support of the wall and so keep himself from falling. Still, the same horrible movement of the floor went on, so that the spot on which he had been standing such a little while before had now disappeared.

Then his presence of mind came back to him. It was clear that the floor was being gradually withdrawn inch by inch from under him, and, in obedience to the action of some hidden mechanism, was vanishing into a recess in the wall on a level with itself and constructed purposely to hold it. But what would be found under it when it should wholly have disappeared? The question sent Goodreeve to his knees in the hope of being able to solve it. But when he peered into the opening, which was now nearly a yard in width, he could discern nothing but a black, impenetrable gulf, the depth of which he had no means of testing. Then, while he was still peering into it, there reached his ears the sound of the faint drip-drip of water somewhere far below. He rose to his feet with a shudder. What was there under him? What was he about to be precipitated into? A noisome dungeon, a foul disused well—or what?

Two strides took him to the door, and he flung himself against it with the energy of desperation, but to no purpose. Then he shouted for help again and again, but with little hope that it would come, listening intently between whiles; but the deadly quietude was unbroken by any sound save the slow dripping of the unseen water under his feet. Everything was clear to him now. Poltykoff and those associated with him, in the belief that he was Ivan Penleath, had determined to punish the latter's treachery by inflicting upon him the dread penalty which the laws made and sworn to by themselves prescribed for any one found guilty of a crime such as the one he was charged with.

For him, Austin Goodreeve, the victim of a terrible mistake, there was no hope—none!

Goodreeve was no braver than the majority of men in his place would

have been. It was not that he flinched at the prospect of death as such—probably he would have faced it with tolerable equanimity on either a battlefield or a bed of sickness. It was the horrible nature of the fate which was creeping upon him inch by inch, and would presently overtake him, that appalled him and filled his soul with the blackness of a despair unillumined by the faintest ray of hope.

With his back planted against the wall, he stood staring with a sort of horrible fascination at the ever-widening gulf in front of him, moving his feet an inch or two at a time as the floor slid little by little from under them. How long would there remain sufficient space for him to stand upon? A quarter of an hour, or, it might be, twenty minutes at the most. And then! Already he tasted the bitterness of death.

A cold, damp air, as if generated by stagnant water, filled his nostrils. Ghostly fingers seemed to clutch at him. A shadowy face seemed to be staring up at him with drowned eyes out of the darkness. He shivered from head to foot. A palsy of fear had laid hold of him.

Tearing his eyes away from the shadowy face, which he yet knew to be no face, he bent them on the dimly-burning lamp overhead. How many tragedies similar to the one now being enacted had it looked down upon? The question put itself vaguely to him, and then his mind passed on to something else. He was losing the power of consecutive thought, mental stagnation was creeping over him.

Then, while his eyes were still fixed on the lamp, he awoke in an instant to a sense of the most vivid life. An inspiration, for it could be termed nothing less, had flashed lightning-like across his brain, and therewith a hope had been born within him.

HE HAD been a clever amateur athlete in his time, chiefly in running or leaping contests; but whether he could succeed in doing that which he was now bent upon trying to do was something doubtful. Still, it was his solitary chance, and desperate though it might seem, it must be attempted. So he stripped off his overcoat, which would have been an encumbrance to him, and let it drop into the gulf which yawned at his feet. After a second or two the sound of a faint, dull splash reached him, and sent a chill down his spine. By this time the whole of the floor had vanished save a space about three feet wide.

But all his faculties, mental and physical, were now concentrated on the task before him. His eyes were fixed on the lamp, or, rather, on the chain from which it hung. Crouching a little in order to give himself an added impetus, he sprang with all his strength into the air, and clutched wildly with both hands at the chain—clutched at it, grasped it, and clung to it. Would it bear his weight? Should it fail to do so, he would but have anticipated his fate by a few brief minutes.

For some seconds the chain, with Goodreeve clinging to it, swung ominously to and fro, but it did not break; and although he knew that he was by no means out of the wood, despair gave place to hope, and life had never seemed sweeter to him than at that moment.

Cautiously and slowly he worked his way upward till he was in a position to twine his legs round the chain and to rest one foot on the cross-piece from which the lamp was suspended. When he had succeeded thus far and next looked down, there was no floor to be seen. It had wholly disappeared, and he was hanging over the void of blackness in which it had been intended that he should find his grave.

But when a few minutes had passed thus he became aware of something which for a moment or two caused a lump to rise in his throat and every nerve in his body to tingle. The floor was beginning to reappear, emerging almost imperceptibly from its mysterious hiding-place, and seeming to Goodreeve's excited fancy as though it were endowed with a half-human intelligence of its own. It had accomplished its murderous task, and was returning to its place as if nothing had happened.

He could not take his eyes off it. Then suddenly, after a last dying flicker, the lamp went out and he was left in darkness deeper than any he had ever experienced before.

How the next half-hour sped with him he could not afterward have told. His mind

was a prey to a confluence of emotions which would have defied analysis. Hope and fear held him in turn, with brief spells of chill indifference, when to live or die seemed a matter of equal consequence. Physically he was cramped and full of aches, owing to his inability to change his position. He told himself that, after waiting a little while longer, he would drop to the floor, which by that time would be back in its place, and there await whatever might happen next.

And so the weary time wore on. Goodreeve was on the point of dropping from his perch when the silence was broken by a faint noise in the corridor outside. Holding his breath, he waited, and next moment the bolt of the door was shot back, and the door itself opened, disclosing the figure of a man carrying in one hand a lighted lantern, who advanced a little way into the cell and peered about him, but without perceiving Goodreeve overhead in the dark. Now was the latter's chance, and at once he seized it. Dropping to the floor just behind the man, he gripped him round the throat with both hands and sent him and his lantern crashing headlong to the floor. A moment later he was out of the cell and had pulled to the door behind him, which shut with a snap of the bolt. Then he sped swiftly along the two corridors, and so reached the entrance hall, where he paused for a couple of seconds to listen, but all was silence the most profound. A few more strides brought him to the front door, which he found locked and bolted as if the house were shut up for the night. He fumbled nervously with the fastenings, in a sweat of fright the while lest his escape should be cut off at the last moment. But presently the door yielded to his efforts, opening on well-oiled hinges, and he gave a great gasp of relief as he sprang across the threshold of that accursed house into the blessed freedom of the starlit night. Down the drive he raced, not without more than one backward glance, and so emerged into the high road. Whether he turned to the right hand or to the left, he could not afterward have told. He ran as if for a wager, and before long he came within the radius of the street lamps, and found himself traversing a road lined with large detached houses, but in what quarter of the suburbs it was he had not the remotest notion. It was just as well that he did not encounter a policeman in his flight, seeing that he was bareheaded, that his dress was disordered, and that there was a great smear across his shirt-front due to his close embrace of the sooty chain.

AS HE reached the corner of a side street an empty hansom came bowling out of it. Whereupon he hailed the driver, who at once drew up. "I want to be driven, as quickly as possible, to No. 11, Riversdale Mansions," said Goodreeve. "I presume you know them?"

"I know 'em right enough. Jump in, sir, and I'll drive you straight there," replied the man. That his fare was hatless and seemed to have been in a scrimmage of some sort was no concern of his.

It was a long drive, and in the course of it, Goodreeve had time to pull his wits together. Many disquieting quetions put themselves to him, not one of which he was in a position to answer, and he was still pondering them when the cab drew up at Riversdale Mansions. "Mrs. Penleath and I will have to have a very straight talk with each other," he said grimly, as he alighted.

The janitor Goodreeve had seen before answered his summons, and stared somewhat at his apearance.

"I presume that Mrs. Penleath is at home? She is expecting me," said Austin, as he stepped into the hall.

"No, sir," replied the man; "both Mr. and Mrs. Penleath are gone. They left an hour and a half ago, taking their luggage with them. They have given up their flat, and have left no address."

For a few seconds Goodreeve was too stupefied to speak. Then he said, "I was under the impression that Mrs. Penleath was living apart from her husband."

"Nothing of the sort, sir. They took flat No. 11 ready furnished, a month ago, and have been living here ever since. Here is a note sir, which Mrs. Penleath asked me to give you."

He took the note, hardly knowing that he did so. His mind was in a whirl, but one fact stood out in clear relief. He had been tricked and befooled. Mrs. Penleath had

made him the scapegoat for her husband, caring little what risks he might run, so long as a door was opened for the latter's escape. Oh, it was monstrous—monstrous!

Crossing to the lamp by the lift, he tore open the envelope, which was addressed, "Austin Goodreeve, Esq." It contained a banknote for twenty pounds, but not a scrap of writing. Had Mrs. Penleath, then, in happy ignorance of the penalty incurred by her husband, acted in the full belief that he, Goodreeve, would come back safe and sound from the errand she had sent him on? It almost looked as if such were the case.

But the janitor, standing by the open door, was regarding him curiously, and the cabman was waiting. Something must be decided, and at once. Recrossing the hall, he said to the doorkeeper, "Have you a spare room where you can put me up for the night? I have been set upon by hooligans, and am not fit to go to a hotel."

"Excuse the question, sir, but are you related to Mr. Penleath? I ask on account of the remarkable likeness between you."

"We are cousins," replied Austin, mendaciously.

"His room is vacant, sir, if—"

"The very thing. I will discharge my cabby, and then to bed."

Probably his own clothes were still where he had left them. He would don them again in the morning, thankful that he could call his life his own, the world still before him.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

My calendar informs me that with the next issue WEIRD TALES *celebrates its thirtieth anniversary. I would like to be among those who offer their congratulations to the most long-lived of all imaginative magazines.*

I, myself, am too young to have read those early issues of The Unique Magazine but I have read many of those stories in later editions of WT as well as in the Arkham House books. I have in my library a copy of The Moon Terror *which, I believe, was the first anthology of stories taken exclusively from your magazine.* The Moon Terror *is something of a* rara avis *today and I'm quite proud to own that book.*

It would be fitting on this occasion to present a list of what I consider to be the ten best stories to have appeared in WT but such a task, I find, is impossible. At least 50 outstanding phantasies come to mind and there are more than that number which are equally good but which have, for the moment, escaped my memory. For every poorly-written tale that is printed in WT (and that only proves that the editor is human, after all) there are at least a dozen readable ones and of that dozen you will find that about half of them are potential classics. This is not merely my opinion; it is shared by all the readers of your Unique Magazine. Please keep up the good work.

Every best wish to you.

Yours by the Doom that came to Sarnath,
Irving Glassman,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

I just had to crawl out of my tomb to tell you, altho' there isn't much I can add to what every one writes in to you in praise of WEIRD TALES. *I have been reading your magazine for over ten years and will continue to do so. That is, if the moon comes out every night.*

I would like to mention tho', I would like to see more of H. P. Lovecraft. To me he's tops. Those who don't think so should have my surroundings. Then they would agree. I would also like you to continue the fine artistry on your covers. I have often wondered at what those fellows look like, some night I think I'll drop in on them. Well, my time is limited so I must leave you till another full moon. Keep up the good work with the great stories you've been having.

R. Williams,
Calgary, Alberta

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

I'm really impressed by WEIRD TALES *illustrations of late. In the first place, the three covers that Freas has so far done are each masterpieces in their own way and I would like to see lots more of them. He's good.*

I'm glad you're using some of the old stories from the earlier days of WEIRD, *but wonder if this is not making it harder for the new names in the field to get ahead. The trouble is that you use the reprints usually in long lengths, while the new material is usually short. Doesn't seem to balance right somehow.*

Anyway, I think the best thing in the January issue was August Derleth's "Sexton, Sexton in the Wall." *I like Derleth's work considerably and feel that he is really a craftsman in the writing game.*

The same remark applies to Seabury Quinn; I know that Quinn's very busy, but couldn't you coerce him into doing you some weird fiction?

Well, WT keeps trying, anyway.

Dave Hammond,
Runnemede, N. J.

THAT HEMLOCK WORD

WE HAVE received further letters from Miss Maude C. Parker who says that her prescription for sleep via a "magic" word—hemlock—in our last issue has brought her quite a few replies, and considerable satisfaction. We give here her first letter to us, and can only remark that what seems like humor to some (an editor, for instance) may seem poison—possibly even hemlock—to others:

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

Please let me explain to you as kindly and patiently as I can, that when I spoke of hemlock *as a magic word for inducing sleep, I did* not *mean a hemlock tree or forest. If you thought of a hemlock forest when you tried the word, it is "no wonder" you obtained no results!*

What I had reference to was a poisonous herb *of the Celery family, having small white flowers known as* hemlock. *This is supposed to be a magic herb often used as an ingredient in witches' brews. For example, in Shakespeare's* "Macbeth," *the three witches used hemlock in the brew which they were preparing for Macbeth. The third witch, one of the "secret, black, and midnight hags" said, "root of hemlock digged in the dark," as she threw it into the Cauldron.*

Need I say more?

Maude C. Parker,
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Apropos the current Lovecraft controversy. Let us be honest and admit that all have been thrilled to the quick and chilled to the bone by such masterpieces as Cool Air, In the Vault, Pickman's Model, The Thing on the Doorstep and The Colour Out of Space; *where then does our quarrel lie? The answer of all current "detractors" sums unanimous—and this fact alone should be suggestive to the other side—in the claptrap and hogwash that has become notorious as the Chthulher mythology.*

It is here and here alone that Lovecraft becomes truly "affected, turgid and labored," and a deficiency of imagination is supplemented by a veritable morass by involved rhetoric. When I say deficiency of imagination I mean poetic *imagination, strange as that may seem to some; for the finest literature in any genre—and that includes the poetic sensitivity of imagination, a subtleness of psychological observation and a sublime* delicacy *in the unfoldment of the tale that at once stamps the work as being indeed "the precious life-blood of a master-spirit," to quote Milton's lines. And H. P. Lovecraft's offense in his Yoggoth tales is an offense in the first place against poetry and in the second against delicacy, deny it who will. Artistically these stories exhibit a shocking lapse of taste. It is not* what *he does so much as how he does it that defeats Lovecraft. He commits the unpardonable crime of tactlessly over-laborating and revealing his subject in its stark naked essence, of exposing an originally ominous and deliciously evasive field of aesthetic experience to the light of common day and subsequently of reducing an eerie and mystic idea to the inevitable contempt consequent upon over-familiarity. The result, as Mr. Wilcox has discerningly pointed out in his letters, is that the horror is all in the telling and none in the substance of what is told; if an author must tell you in so many words how fearful and ghastly his creations are, what need have the creatures themselves for enacting the story?*

Joseph C. Wenk,
Toronto, Ontario

RANDOM HOUSE

Limbo by Bernard Wolfe • A long novel—438 pages—of men and women playing their parts in history, which has yet to happen. The author himself says that he is writing about the overtone and undertow of now in the guise of 1990 because it would take decades for a year like 1950 to be milked of its implications. His tale is an ambitious one, and one much to be appreciated by quite of few of WEIRD TALES intensive readers.

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

The Currents of Space by Isaac Asimov • On the Planet Florina were textile mills and in those mills trouble—just like on Earth. Florina was a doomed planet, but still intrigue, a desperate race with time and courageous struggle went on there. Asimov is out of the top drawer of science-fiction writers, and the fans are going to eat this up heartily.

. . . nighthawks flying, spooky rustlings in the willows—

WHISPER WATER

by LEAH BODINE DRAKE

In
the next
WEIRD TALES

That was what the little shop was for—to sell dreams.

The Dream Merchant

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

O'GARA was grateful to the little shop, because it was the first thing in which he had taken any interest since Jean's death six months before. It had become, with time, a proprietary interest.

The shop had been vacant for a long, long time. It stood at the corner of the alley behind a duplex apartment building in a neighborhood not generally zoned for commercial purposes. Perhaps some venal politician had permitted it to be built there in the first place.

O'Gara lived in the next street but one, and used to pass it every night. Coming home from work, deep in his own misery, for a long time he passed it without noticing it, but gradually it impinged on his consciousness.

Heading by Jon Arfstrom

He thought it strange that the little shop should stand unoccupied, for it seemed an ideal location for a delicatessen, handy to the wives of the neighborhood who could slip out in their housedresses for that pound of coffee or butter that they'd forgotten at the super-market.

Quite without realizing it, O'Gara grew fond of the vacant store. It seemed so forlorn. Perhaps, in his woe, he identified it with himself because of that quality. Certainly when he noticed, some weeks later, evidences of activity about the place, he felt a curious surge of gladness that seemed, on the face of it, absurd. He used to watch then, every night, to see what manner of business might open there.

He was puzzled when finally he saw the new sign upon the window. Across the glass was written, in elaborate golden script:

DREAMS
BY
ALIDA

It seemed an odd name for a commercial shop. Back of the display window, black velvet curtains completely hid the interior of the store from view. O'Gara was curious, wondering what manner of wares might be sold there. Candy, cookies, lingerie, gowns? With that name, it could be anything.

That first night he saw the sign—it was a Wednesday—curiosity impelled him to try the door, but it was locked. The same thing happened on the two succeeding nights. On Friday evening, when he couldn't gain admittance, he asked his landlady if the shop were open for business yet.

"Why, yes, I think it is," she said. "I passed there today, and the door was open, and I saw a saleslady inside. I caught only a fleeting glimpse of her, but she seemed a very attractive girl."

But she was unable to tell him what sort of stock the new store carried, and O'Gara went upstairs to his lonely apartment, his curiosity entirely unsatisfied.

He was not without a sense of humor, O'Gara, though it had been dampened by tragedy these six months past. But now he said to himself: "This is a fine thing I'm getting worked up over! Making a mystery out of what sort of goods are sold in a little two-by-four shop that I could almost put in my pocket and walk away with."

His handsome, haggard young face grimaced at the folly of it. But even so, he knew what he'd be doing the next afternoon, and it came to pass just as he had mentally predicted. He worked but half a day on Saturdays, so that he passed the shop on his way home at one o'clock in the afternoon. He went in, and stood gravely before the tall young girl on the opposite side of the glass counter.

HIS landlady, he saw, had been right. The girl was lovely. Night-black hair, rain-gray eyes under brows that swooped in delicate upward curves. She was tall as he, and beautifully formed. It was the first time since Jean's death that O'Gara had consciously looked at a woman, and even now his inspection was cursory, so obsessed was he with his mission.

"Excuse me," he said diffidently, "but I had to come in. Please charge it off to simple curiosity. That sign on the window? It's driving me crazy." He grinned sheepishly. "What is it that you sell?" She smiled. "Why, I sell dreams. I'm Alida."

She had a lovely voice, O'Gara noted. Rich as chocolate, thick as cream. He felt a strange sympathetic *rapport* between them, as they smiled at each other, half shyly.

"Dreams?" he wondered. "What kind of dreams?"

Alida said, "What would you dream of? Wealth? Fame? Happiness? Business or professional success? You have only to name it, and I will make your dream possible." Her smile faded then, as she noted the mourning band upon his sleeve. "Perhaps," she said, low, "it's none of these. Perhaps you would want to dream, instead, of someone you loved who is gone?"

"Yes," O'Gara said huskily. "Yes, that's it. I would."

"One moment."

Alida turned, and moved sliding doors, revealing shelves behind them. They were laden with candles of every description. Short ones, tall ones, straight ones, twisted ones, of every tint and shade. She drew forth a short, pointed white candle in a ruby

candlestick, and placed it on the counter before O'Gara.

He fingered it gingerly. "It's not some kind of—of dope?"

She was shocked at his question. "Oh, no! It's entirely harmless of itself. Buy it if you like, and light it tonight, and I promise that you will dream of the one who is gone."

Ah, well, he'd let himself in for this. There's one born every minute, he reflected, and obviously the girl knew the truism, too. Still, he was here, and had yet to make a graceful exit. He inquired the price, and since it wasn't high he paid it without demur, took the candle and its holder, and made his escape, thinking that it was worth the nominal cost.

At the door he looked back, he didn't know why. Alida was regarding him strangely with those soft dark eyes. "Goodbye," she said quietly. "And I hope the dream makes you happy."

And O'Gara dropped his hat, dropped the candle, retrieved them both, and left, feeling all kinds of a fool. He was acting, he realized, absurdly like a man in love.

At home, he put the candle and its holder on the mantel, resolved to leave them there as an ornament only. He was a Celt, but not a mystic. Of course he'd never light the thing! Dreams! No telling what the thing was. It might even contain opium or hashish. Though likely it was harmless enough, he thought grudgingly, remembering the girl. She'd been very pretty, and seemed very kind. A fine business she'd picked for herself! Dreams!

But the thing is, despite his strong intentions, he did light the candle that Saturday night. Even O'Gara himself never inquired too closely into his motivation for the act. Curiosity, hope, despair? Any of these, or perhaps a blend of all three, led him to light the candle. . . .

SUNDAY he could do nothing, for the shop was closed, and the day passed for O'Gara in a fever of impatience. On the Monday following, O'Gara didn't go to work. He was at the little shop as soon as it opened, respectfully making his request of Alida, regarding her with eyes that almost worshiped.

"I would like another candle like the one you sold me Saturday," he said.

"Ah!" Alida said. "It was as I told you? You had your dream?"

O'Gara nodded. "There's one thing, though. I would like a larger candle this time. The dream didn't last long enough."

"Would you tell me about it?"

O'Gara hesitated. It seemed a thing too sacred for revelation. But surely he owed as much to Alida, who had made the dream possible?

So he said: "I lit the candle Saturday night, almost against my will, thinking it was nonsense. For some time, nothing happened. And then—then the room began to fill with a rich blue smoke that thickened and thickened, until at last I felt myself rising, lightening—until I knew I was no longer in the room, but floating down a long, dark tunnel.

"I was not asleep!" O'Gara stressed, though Alida had made no interruption. "I was as entirely conscious as I am now. At the end of the tunnel, I came out into a bright room, painted entirely white, with white velvet curtains drawn across the back, shutting out from my view whatever might be beyond.

"And on a gold settee in the white room, I saw—Jean. Jean, with an infant in her arms!"

"Jean?" Alida questioned softly.

"My wife," O'Gara explained. "She died six months ago, in child-birth."

Alida made a soft sound of pity in her throat. "And what happened in the white room, Mr.—?"

"O'Gara. Everybody calls me Dan."

"What happened then—Dan?"

O'Gara looked distressed. "That's the trouble. I wanted to rush to her, to take her and the child in my arms. But I couldn't move. She was happy, I saw, sitting there playing with the baby. But everything faded so fast that I'm sure she never even realized that I was there, or she would have given me some—some sign. That's why I want another candle. Please, a larger one, that will last longer."

He was startled to see Alida hesitate.

"Please!" O'Gara said again intensely. "You must."

He was relieved when Alida sighed, and reluctantly drew from the stock in the cabinet behind her, another pointed white candle, longer than the first. O'Gara hurriedly paid the modest price, and left to go home with his prize. In his eagerness, he never thought to speculate on the reason for Alida's seeming reluctance to sell him another candle.

And, behind him, watching him go, stood Alida, her finger thoughtfully tapping her lower lip, an inscrutable expression on her lovely face.

O'GARA was back on Tuesday morning, his wallet in his hand.

"Another!" he said hoarsely, like a drunkard.

This time there was no mistaking Alida's reluctance. She took her hands from the counter and backed away, shaking her head.

O'Gara looked his surprise, then apologized. "I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I'm so eager."

"What happened last night?" Alida asked.

O'Gara frowned. "Something went wrong. Oh, I went to the white room again, and saw Jean, all right. But—but she acted as if she didn't want me! She went through the white curtains at the back, and I couldn't follow. Surely there was a mistake? She couldn't have recognized me. You must sell me another candle, Alida, please."

Alida shook her head. "Dan, don't ask me to do that. It would be wrong, wrong."

"Wrong? And you sell the things?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with a dream. It can be a beautiful thing, once in a while. But not—not as an escape from reality."

"What has reality to hold for me?" O'Gara asked bitterly. "I want Jean."

"That's where you're wrong!" Alida cried. She came forward, and took his arm. "Jean doesn't need you. She's happy. What you've had is gone. Life doesn't end for the living. You can't continue to live forever in the past. You must go on. Look, Dan, tell me. You didn't go to work yesterday, or today, did you?"

O'Gara swallowed. "No. But—"

"You see?" Alida said. "It's the dream. You're losing yourself in it, forgetting there is life to be lived."

"I tell you, I *will* have another candle!" In his urgency, he leaned forward, grasped her arm roughly till she cried out.

"Dan! Dan, you're hurting me!"

He looked down stupidly at his big hand on her arm, became conscious of it and of the strong, almost electric, current that seemed to flow up his own arm from hers and into his body. He released his grasp, looked deep into her eyes, like one coming out of ether.

"I'm sorry," he muttered thickly. "Very sorry, Alida. But I still want the candle, and nothing you can say will make me change my mind."

Alida sighed. Frowning, she turned slowly toward the cabinet, and when she placed a candle again on the counter before him, O'Gara drew back.

"That—that candle is not like the others!" he said.

It was a squat, square candle, faintly pink in color.

"No," Alida answered readily. "It's not."

"Then—?"

"I want you to buy it."

O'Gara shook his head. "It—it's a trick of some kind."

Alida did not lie. She leaned closer to him, looked up into his eyes. "Yes, a trick, if you want to call it that. But a pleasant one. There is nothing to fear. I only want to help you. Please, Dan, if you're grateful at all for the other candles I sold you, take this one home and burn it tonight. Please—" she pleaded. "For me."

O'Gara grew conscious of her wonderful smoky eyes, of the beautiful plane of her cheek, so close to his lips.

"And if I do—but only to please you, mind, and out of gratitude—tomorrow you will sell me another white candle like the first ones?"

"Yes," she said. "If you so desire."

And thus it was that O'Gara hurried home to light the squat pink candle that would make him dream of—Alida. Dream just once of Alida.

After that, he was to learn, a clever woman in love could proceed from there.

Who Are We?

by Frances Rogers Lovell

WHEN night comes down,
We go where we never were,
And see what we never saw,
And yet we know
Both what we never were,
And what we never saw.

We do what we never did,
And say what we never said,
And yet we are at home
Where we have never been,
We understand what we never heard.

Our hearts respond
To beauty that has never been seen,
To songs that have never been sung,
Our senses thrill to the peal
Of bells that have never been rung.

With daylight we return
Back where we've always been,
Do what we've always done,
See what we've always seen.

Everything seems the same,
But still, where was it we were?
Were we the ones that were there
Or are we the ones that are here?

While we were there were we we?
Or while we are here, are we we?
And, which we would we rather be?

Because one is too wise to believe in magic, is it wise to revoke laws against witchcraft?

Heading by Virgil Finlay

The Supreme Witch

BY APPLEBY TERRILL

THE logs which had just been laid on the fire were wet, and as the powerful yellow flames wrapped them round, long, hissing spurts of steam broke the silence which was in the room.

At the table with its wine bottles, glasses and candles four men sat—Jacobite conspirators; for they were met in the interests of the Stuart King in exile, James the Third—the Pretender, the government styled him. The four were: the parson, the messenger from King James, Mr. Gartshore the scrivener, and "Old Jem" Lambardiston, the lord of the manor.

Mr. Gartshore was pondering a question of finance, for an answer to which the others waited.

Eventually he spoke:

"Not much above five thousands pounds. Tell his Majesty five thousand guineas."

The messenger made a note; and this concluded the business of the evening. The parson's inclination now was to go. He was ill at ease sitting in Old Jem's house. Nothing short of the Stuart agent's presence in it would have enticed him over the threshold. For not only had he and Old Jem quarreled hotly in the very first hour of their acquaintance, some eighteen months before, rarely speaking since, but Old Jem was reputed to have been a thoroughly bad man all his days, and, in his eighty-seventh year, to be ever ready to gibe at good, to talk with satisfaction of his own misdeeds, and to approve those of others. The only spark in his soul which was not a gleam of evil ('twas commonly said) was a sincere wish that James III could be placed on the throne of his fathers.

So far tonight, the affairs of the exile had fully occupied Old Jem. But with the deliberations finished, it was not improbable that his tongue would turn in malice to themes and assertions which would sharply wound the parson. At least, thus the parson reasoned; and his ears were alert for an attack as he hesitated betwixt remaining and showing discourtesy to the company by taking his leave.

However, Old Jem tended to be silent. Sunken a little in his chair, he watched the messenger fold his papers. Anon he motioned him to fill his glass; and, draining his own, he blinked and closed his eyes, breathing thickly.

The parson, though becoming drawn into converse with Mr. Gartshore, looked at his host. Strive as he would, he could feel no touch of that pity which the old so often stir in one, he could feel only detestation for the aged face in repose. Partly encircled by a tumbled, very white peruke, and now colored high by wine, it was, for all its deep lines, fleshy still. The underlip, tinged with purple, hung loose, the mouth seeming to leer lazily; yet, because of the great puckers about it, 'twas no weak mouth, but ruthless, browbeating.

"There is a lad in Parliament," said the messenger, buttoning his waistcoat over his papers, "a Mr. Faunce, that spoke cleverly on the witchcraft statutes. We should gain him to our side."

"I have seen to it," said the scrivener. He drank, and put down his glass slowly. "Witchcraft!" he exclaimed, a thrill of anger in his voice. "That is some credit to this year 1736, it hath witnessed the snuffing out of the witchcraft laws—and therefore of witchcraft. For the law, and the law only, made witchcraft. . . . To think that in our day—twenty-five, twenty years back—the law of England was murdering women and little girls for witchcraft! . . . Mr. Parson, sir, I grant you there was witchcraft in Israel. But declare to me, was there ever such in England?"

"Nay, there was not," answered the parson emphatically.

Old Jem's eyes opened. Faded and watery, they nevertheless bent on the parson a strong, unwavering gaze, and the limp underlip stiffened truculently.

"Take back your nay, parson," he said, "for I have been in witchcraft. Ay, I have been in it—head and shoulders in as great a piece of witchcraft as witch ever did—and the place of it no farther off than our town down yonder."

OVER his face a shadow came—the kind of shadow that the parson would least have expected to find there. It hinted that once Old Jem had met with something which had apalled even his iron mind.

"In our town?" said the parson. "I have not heard—"

"Certes you have not. 'Twas away back in King Charles' time—nigh to three score years ago. They who were in it with me are long since dead, and 'twas a thing we had no wish to talk of, and hoped we should forget." Old Jem shook his head, with his lips pursed and his eyes cloudy. "I have forgot no scrap, no jot."

"*Voilà,* then, Mr. Lambardiston," said the messenger, "give us the story."

"No," said Old Jem, taking up his snuff-box. "I would not have spoke this much, but the wiping out of the witch laws by these perky fellows who are too wise to believe in magic hath left me in a fume. And when Gartshore there, and Parson—"

He stopped, surveying the scrivener and

parson in turn. "So ye deem it an empty tale, Gartshore, and you too, Parson?" For a few seconds his lips pressed together tightly, his face ever setting harder, decision growing in his eyes, which smoldered with exasperation. "Very well!" he cried; "ye shall have the tale; and if ye will go to the jail tomorrow ye shall find some records that will savor of its truth." He raised himself and leaned forward with his arms on the table.

The messenger breathed "Good!" Mr. Gartshore muttered something apologetic, and the parson's interest vanquished his inclination to go.

"Now listen," said Old Jem.

His voice was wonderfully powerful for his years; and he gave his narrative with an orderliness and ease that were to be anticipated from one who in the past had been reckoned one of the finest Tory orators in the House of Commons.

"To begin with," he said, "I must go back to the year '67—1667, when I was a lad of seventeen. Witchcraft trials were frequent enough thenadays, as you do know; and at the autumn assize here we had the case of a woman who lived in this very town. Her name was Shafto—Ellen Shafto. She was a widow whose man had been killed in the great Four Days Fight with the Hollander fleet. She had two young children, a boy and a girl, and was of no ripe age herself, say, twenty-eight. And a pretty woman she was, darkhaired, slim, and smiling, with a sweet curve to the jaw and a taking poise of the head—as I had begun to note. But, despite her prettiness and her poverty, she was known as a very honest woman.

"Having been ere she came hither, needlemaid to some modish madame, she kept herself and her children by sewing for the gentlefolk roundabout here.

"Now there was another woman—I forgot how called—who was her neighbor and did work of a like kind; and betwixt her and Mrs. Shafto jealousy and quarreling arose.

"After a while it chanced that this woman's right hand and arm became swelled, so that she sorely pained and could not sew. Old Dr. Peters, the leech, could in no wise get rid of the swelling and was puzzled to discover a cause for it.

"A bruit spread that Mrs. Shafto had bewitched the arm, accomplishing this by standing at her window with a silk kirtle across her own arm and her eyes held on the other woman's house. At her trial, under threat of torture, Mrs. Shafto pleaded guilty and was sentenced to be hanged.

"Now mark this well. She was to be hanged in the market-place, opposite the Red Bull inn. On the morning a great and savage crowd was gathered there, groaning and yelling and bent to seize her ere she reached the gallows-tree and to give her a rougher death than by the rope. For witchcraft is a crime that oft will drive a populace to a frenzy.

"I was looking on from the Red Bull, ill enough pleased by the scene—being young, and the witch so comely; and close on 9 o'clock, the hour for the hanging, everything appeared the horrider to me because of the strange quality of the daylight. It was November—for the assize had come late. The sun was but little risen, and shone weakly through a gap it had melted in the thick murk which floated over us. The market place was partly shadows and partly a blotch of queer, heavy, yellow light, wherein the faces of those who tiptoed to see if Mrs. Shafto were near—faces with teeth showing and eyes wide open—had the look of waxen masks.

"Of a sudden the bell in the clock-house commenced to ring nine. The multitude was stricken silent on the instant. All were bewildered because Mrs. Shafto was not come. But presently we caught the sound of a huge, angry cry from near the jail. And soon it was known that the sheriff, aware of what the mob intended, had called Ralph Timmins, the hangman, to him and bidden him hang Mrs. Shafto privily, which he did forthwith in her cell, putting the rope over a beam.

"My father, who was in the jail with the sheriff, told me afterwards that neither the sheriff nor he went to see the execution done. They stood with divers others in the passage by the main door, it being wellnigh dark save where a flood of the dull, yellow light fell, this coming to them through the

window of a room whereof the door, opening upon the passage, was swung wide back.

"And anon, my father said, Ralph Timmins walked down the stone stairs to them, and was near to falling at the last step on account of the gloom; and saluting the sheriff, he quoth: 'Sir, I have put the young witch away, as your worship bid'."

OLD JEM stopped to pour some wine. Presently the scrivener asked.

"And the woman's arm?"

"Mended from that day," said Old Jem. "Oh, Ellen Shafto was a witch, doubt it not; and maybe her power was far vaster than she showed. But she is not the witch of my tale—the supreme witch that was more potent than a score of Ellens.

"Now harken again:

"It was, I said, in '67 that Ellen Shafto was hanged. For the next twelve years I came but little to these parts, but, my father dying in '79, I removed hither from London.

"In a short while I learned that Ellen Shafto's children, the lad now aged twenty-one and the girl eighteen, still dwelt near the town; and one day I met this girl in the street. I knew her as soon as I saw her, for she woke my recollection of her mother. She was younger, fresher, even slighter, but she had the same dark curls, the same sweet curve of the jaw, the same alluring poise of the head. Only in the expression of her face did she differ much. The mother had been wont to be smiling, the daughter's lips pouted (though in a pretty fashion) and her eyebrows, with the line of a little frown between them, warned one of a temper.

"I stopped her, asking her name—which she told me was Nora—and inquiring how she and her brother lived.

"Shyl, but giving me no further curtsy than that with which she had halted, she said that her brother had received a gift of money from the lady in London in whose service their mother had been. With this money he had leased a trifle of land, which he farmed, and she dwelt with him.

"I spoke with her for several minutes, and had meant to drop a couple of guineas into her palm; but I noted a stormy sparkle in her eyes when the coins clinked in my pocket, so I let them fall back; and I lifted not my fingers to her chin as I turned away—from memory of that stormy sparkle.

"But there and then I was mightily in love with Nora Shafto; and I knew that the winning of her was now to be the aim of my life, and that she would fight me hard."

Old Jem's eyes, which seemed growing dimmer and dimmer as he lost himself more surely in the past, half lit for a moment and swept to the parson—who discovered straightway, to the discomfiture of his conscience, that in one thing at least he had estimated Old Jem unjustly.

"I ask your pardon, Parson," quoth Old Jem, "for what I shall say next. But to give you a full understanding of my story I must speak plainly."

His eyes moved from the parson.

"As I said, I was mightily in love with Nora Shafto. I had no thought to marry her—though when 'twas too late I would have wed her a dozen times over if that could have brought her to me. . . . That she was a witch's daughter, and might be a witch herself, was naught to me. I was the sort of man who would have enjoyed to wed a witch for the fun of it—were she a witch of birth. But I was not the sort of man to wed a needle-woman's daughter—were she white souled as an angel.

"And certes, Nora Shafto was that, so far as accepting my love was concerned. She could have loved me. For a brief while, during which she let me speak often with her, I saw her affection for me grow—grow radiant, burn forth. But that was before she knew I meant not marriage. Afterwards—for months afterwards—I followed her, waylaid her, besought her, vainly. The flame which had burned was dead. I offered her what she would—gems by the handful, gold and more gold, till she had the chance to beggar me well-nigh! She answered nay to all; not even a kiss did I get from her save a flick of a one which I snatched.

"That was by the horse-pool below the town, of an evening in the May of '80. I had intercepted my young paragon, and most lovely was she to see, a-stand with her head thrown back and her color bright, holding me at a distance with her look. The frowning line was plain betwixt her eyebrows, her eyes were all anger, and there

were revealed—one near each nostril—two little stern furrows which somehow made her face appear old without taking away its youthfulness—a strange blending that was hauntingly beautiful.

"But of late her tongue and manner had so scathed me that I could keep my temper only by the hardest effort. And this evening, being presently jabbed by a retort from her, I exclaimed:

" 'Nora, verily you are a little spite! You answer nothing but bitterness and spite to all I say, and I have never spoke a word to you that was not love and gentleness—till now.'

"She was in no way disconcerted by my new tone. She seemed rather to feel braced and of better self-assurance by reason of it. There was less anger in her face, and a good deal more of bold contempt, which is a thing to make one seethe, coming from a person of low birth.

" 'Ay, you were very gentle, Mr. Lambardiston—thinking to fill my ears with toys,' said she, using a common phrase of the time. 'Farthing toys,' she added, her eyes most scornful.

" 'Farthing toys is a lie,' I said. 'And that you know well.' I strove to master myself. 'Nora, I promised—I promise, to put round your fingers, round your neck, round your pretty curls, toys worth the ransom of this town. . . . You will do all the gaining, I shall do all the spending—'

"She moved her shoulders quickly, lifting her chin higher and looking deliberately away from me.

" 'Ay, that's your sleek prating,' she said in a slow, loathing way, '—you will do all the spending! . . . And you blamed me for a liar! You—that will do all the spending! . . . Oh!' cried she, looking back to me—and I saw in her eyes that she hated me—'Oh, why doth it not choke you—that damned lie? You will spend some bits of gold, but I—I must spend my soul—my soul! . . . Mr. Lambardiston whines to me to buy him a little diversion—with my soul. "Let us two voyage through loveland," quoth he. And I am to pay for his voyage—with my soul! Faugh, you blackguard cur!'

"Nora Shafto was ready with words, and her voice was of a betterbred quality than fitted her station—for after her mother's hanging a lady of the district had taken her into her house and cared for her well until her own death. But this denouncement had more barbed wit than anything she had given me yet—and it smarted me mightily; though I covered this with a laugh, deeming that a kiss would be ample amends for the invective, and determining that this instant I would take it.

"There was a horseman riding slowly up the lane towards us, but I cared not for him, and stepped across to Nora with a word of my intent. I noted that, instead of seeking to dart aside, she put her hand to the basket of flower roots, dug from the hedge, which she was carrying; and then my hands clapped on her shoulders and my lips touched a corner of her mouth as she jerked it past me.

"She stamped swiftly on my foot—I wore but shoes—threw off one of my hands, whirled, and got free, the basket dropping to the ground and emptying forth its plants. From amid these she whipped up a dull, stout knife.

" 'So that is Mr. Lambardiston!' she gasped. 'Mr. Lambardiston—of the great gentry that visit the law on poor folk . . . Mr. Lambardiston, that was made deputy sheriff a se'nnight since. An attacker of maids!' She showed me the knife. 'I want you to try again,' she said; 'for yonder comes a gentleman that shall swear I killed you fairly.'

"I had a good mind to try again. But the fellow on horseback had flipped up his nag, and was trotting forward all a-grin; and I had no sword with which to stay him from interference, whereas a very long iron was jogging by his leg. Withal, as Nora had fleered, I was deputy sheriff, and could not but cut an unseemly figure in the affair, which by an argument with the arriving knave, might be much noised.

"So I turned from her, limping with my hurt foot.

" 'You witch's jade!' I said; 'you have the black temper of a witch yourself.'

"I heard her draw in her breath at that. I heard her move, as though she meditated to cast herself on my back. But then she spoke mockingly:

" 'I knew it!' cried she. 'I knew your

brute's mouth would go to my poor mother . . . Oh, ay, I have a witch's temper, Mr. Lambardiston, and witch's craft enough to keep myself out of your hands however you strive.'

"At this last idle saying—as I deemed it—I faced about for a moment and quietly bade her cease from dangerous words of witchcraft. For though I never would have repeated them to her harm, the horseman was now within earshot.

"Having given which warning, I went home.

"TWO days afterwards her brother, Francis Shafto, a big, dour-visaged fellow, placed himself surlily, with extreme impudence, in my path as I was entering the town. He threatened that if I so much as spoke to Nora henceforth, he would so beat me with his cudgel that I should lie abed for many a week; and he added 'twas his belief no magistrate or judge would do other than hold him justified in this.

"It was plain that I must have him cleared out of the place. I wrote that same day to a friend, captain of a second-rate of the navy; and a week after this, half a dozen sailors went to Shafto's farm and impressed Master Francis for the sea—most lawlessly, I confess.

"Hearing that he was taken off, with Nora left swooning from the fury with which she had struggled to tear him from the sailors, I felt I had done cleverly. His release would be an additional bribe to offer Nora. . . .

"I had not done cleverly; I had done fatally.

"The first hint I got of the truth was a report that the seamen, on their road to the coast with Francis Shafto, had been charged into by a vicious bull. Then followed the news that no bull had attacked them, but a black filly, which, bursting suddenly through a gate, had raced straightway upon them and, biting, lashing, trampling, like a fiend, had badly torn one man, broken the leg of another, and killed a third outright. Francis Shafto, whose hands were tied because of a fight he had made at the farm, was the first to be knocked down, but was not harmed by the beast, which presently, setting her teeth in his coat, began to drag him away; but a sailor, who by now had drawn his whinger, struck her on the shoulder, whereat she dropped Shafto and clattered off fast.

"I was starting forth for London when I had these tidings. Beyond being somewhat pleased that Shafto was unhurt, I was little interested. But, returning hither a few days later to renew matters with Nora, I was prettily astounded to find that she was in jail, accused of having changed herself into the black filly and slain a sailor with the hope to rescue her brother.

"I will tell you what was evidenced against her. The filly, when driven off by the blow from the whinger, was seen again by no man, nor was anyone in the countryside to be found who owned her or remembered to have seen her. At the time of the onset Nora was a day gone from home, having told her friends that she would privily follow the press-party and, it might be, persuade some folk to attack it for her. She came back on the day after the filly's attack. She was very wearied and draggled and white, and in great pain from a cut across her shoulder, which had been done, she said, by striking against a fence in the dark.

"Now the tale of the filly and the whinger was reached here before her; and, everyone knowing of her mother, tongues were already a-wag. It needed but the cut on Nora's shoulder to set the town mad with excitement. Never had there been so clear a case of a child inheriting evil magic! And the strength of this magic in Nora! She was a far more dangerous witch than ever her mother was. The magistrates were clamored at to commit her to prison, and this was done ere she had been home many hours—a crowd lingering about the jail till nearly midnight, roaring and threatening to break in to her, and everyone saying that no man could account himself at all safe while she were alive.

"I know not whether to believe Nora a witch or to flout the notion, but I did know one thing—she should be neither hanged nor harmed, if my influence could shield her; and I was very certain it could.

"Forthwith, using my sheriff powers, I

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proclaimed penalties against any that should make a turmoil outside the jail; and I called out and stationed therein a score of trainbandmen, armed to the eyelids. I used the rough of my tongue to the magistrates who had caused the arrest and detention of Nora, instead of flogging the mob that had clamored against her.

"And then I went to Nora.

"My purpose was to dispel her fears at once, to tell her that I would see she was put on trial at the assize, that indeed I would get her freed ere the week was out. And as I strode with the chief turnkey to her cell I was sure she would read much of this in my face, and, in her relief and gratitude, give me a kinder welcome of late.

"When the fellow had unbarred the door, I bade him begone to a distance, and, swinging back the door myself, I entered the cell.

"Nora greeted me with a gasp of her breath, with stormshine in her eyes. Despite that I came to a standstill, she moved, facing me, to the far wall. Leaning against it, with her head held back and touching it, she commenced to rage at me, her voice low for the most part, yet often thrown hither and thither by her passion—the palms of her hands now and again beating upon the wall.

"What need to tell you her speech? 'Twas the old tale of hate over again, yet now twice as bitter, with its accusation that I had planned her brother's carrying-off, whereby I was responsible for the pass she was come to.

"For a space she would heed no word of mine. But anon she began to listen to my protest that I would avert all peril from her—obtain her quick release. While harkening, she seemed to cool fast from her rage, her palms lying quite still against the wall, her eyes lacking luster. Her face had become wooden, as the saying is. This I little liked.

" 'For your favor,' she said, on my pausing, 'I am to love you? Is that the compact?'

" 'Scarce a compact,' I answered. 'I am not so mean a man I will not save you unless you shall love me . . . No, no, Nora; yet I shall hope you will change to me; and mark you this—if you do, your brother shall swiftly be libertied from the navy.'

" 'Ah-h,' she said softly, a dreaminess in her eyes—eyes that were much my study when I was with her; they were so fluent of expression, so beautiful. 'Ah-h,' she said; 'in truth—you in all this villain world! For see, you are high-placed, with my poor life and my brother's much in your power; wherefor you should be of stern honor, Mr. Lambardiston—should you not?—that we and such as we could ever trust you. But what are you!' She breathed between her set teeth with a hissing sound. 'If my mother's spirit is here beside me,' she said, 'of which I am very sure, what must she think of you? Have you no whit of shame, striving to break me in the room where my mother doubtless stands?'

" 'Why doubtless here?' I asked.

"She looked upwards. Following her glance, I saw above us a balk of dark oak spanning the cell. I exclaimed loudly; for I was moved by the cruel thoughtlessness which had caused Nora to be placed in the very room in which her mother was hanged.

" 'You shall be taken out of this,' I said, making a step to summon the turnkey.

"But, far from thanking me, she brought me to a halt by declaring she would liefer remain, and would entreat Mr. Palmer, the governor of the jail, to put her back in this cell, did I have her removed.

"The dreaminess had gone from her eyes, but for some seconds it came again. I could not tell whether she spoke chiefly to me or to herself when she said:

" 'I do remember my mother very well, though I had her for so little a time. She was a dear, sweet mother, and I know doth yearn to hearten me now that I am accused as she was . . . I think I am more near to her in this room than I could be elsewhere on earth.' Her voice sank, becoming a moan, soft—scarce unhappy. 'I have wanted my mother. None knows how much! She was all tender love, and the world is loneliness and cruel as stone. I shall be glad to go away to my mother, though I would it were not by the hangman.'

"Then her eyes, meeting mine squarely, lit of a sudden. There was a quick rousing of her mind and body. She started from the wall and bent towards me. 'But rather would I go by hanging, rather by the roastingpost, than come to you—you sneaking dog! Ay, an hundred times rather!'

"It was clear she could not be reasoned with that day. I turned on my heel, wasting no more words; and, walking from the jail, I decided that my best plan would be to seem to abandon her until she had been put in greater fright than she was in at present. I would let her stand her trial, which I doubted not would result in her condemnation; and then I would secure a pardon."

OLD JEM sipped from his glass. Setting it down, he relapsed in his chair, and clasped his hands, without having looked at any of his auditors. His gaze brooded darkly on the wall opposite him.

"She was tried at the summer assize. She pleaded 'not guilty,' and was not threatened with torture to make her alter that. For the judge was old Jack Phillips, no firm believer in witchcraft—as his words to the jury showed. But the jury took only a few minutes to find her guilty; and she was condemned to be hanged in the market place, where her mother was to have been flung off.

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"Already I had arranged almost fully about getting the pardon; and after the case Jack Phillips threw in his weight with me; and I had the pardon in my hands with forty hours to spare. But I meant to bring Nora fairly to the ground, with no fight left in her, this time. I had charge of the execution—Holden, the sheriff, being bedridden—and I intended to say naught of the pardon until my pretty one was within a few minutes of being carted forth to the gibbet, and the uproar of the mob, sounding from the market place, should tell her that, outside the prison, she would have no safety, despite her pardon, except she drove forth with me and my train-bandmen and lodged in my house.

"I would forbid any sheltering of her in the jail. And by a gift of drink to the mob I should have inflamed it to an extraordinary ferocity, such as, in her stubbornest hate of me, she could not dream to face.

"Oh, I had Miss Nora in a rare trap from which there was no escape but into my doorway.

"With her pardon under my pillow, I slept complacent of mind through the night which she would deem to be her last.

"I started early for the jail in the morning—the clearest, sweetest July morning I had ever known, with the hills beyond the woods wondrous outstanding and gleaming in the sunlight. I went afoot to enjoy the air, having ordered my coach to be at the jail for my return with Nora.

"Her hanging was to be at 9, opposite the Red Bull. Passing behind the market place, I felt the air a-tremble from the vast confusion of voices coming thence; and at intervals these uplifted in a shout of execration against her that nigh stunned one—which noise reaching me as I paused before the jail to warn a group of persons that I should permit no gathering there, was like the tumbling down of thousands of planks of wood.

"I smiled to think what a tempest would burst when the news of the pardon spread (I had increased my train-bandmen to fifty), and to think what indignation would be shown by sundry gentlemen who were to meet me in the jail—when it was disclosed

to them that the pardon (which they would have expected instant tidings of) was by no means newly arrived. These same gentlemen—Palmer, the governor, Captain Jones and Sir Hugh Gerrow, justices—were prone to take offense at my high-handed acts, as they termed them.

"However, I saw not how the latter two received the tidings; for about half after 8, they being not yet come, I informed Palmer, bidding him tell them, and went up to Nora's cell. On my way I met Ralph Timmins, the hangman, who had put her mother to death by means of the beam in the cell. He was an oldish man now, with his shoulders much bent and his thin beard streaked white and brown.

" 'There be a riot of howling in the market-square, your worship,' said he. ' 'Tis as it was in her mother's time, or worse, I'd affirm.' He rubbed his chin with his knuckles.

" 'A queer, sad business, sir—these two. Both so pretty to look on and like as a pair o' pink roses.'

" 'You will have no hanging today, Ralph,' I answered; 'she is pardoned. But you shall lose nothing in fees.' Unwilling to stay even long enough to get out some gold for him, because of my eagerness to greet Nora, I added: 'Wait for me below.'

"THE door of Nora's cell was open, two turnkeys standing by the threshold. I gestured them away, and walked in. I could perceive that Nora had gone white at the sound of my approach. Perchance she knew not my step—thought one was come to take her to the cart. When I confronted her the color began to come again to her cheeks; and the line of the little frown between her eyebrows was deeper than I had ever discerned it.

"She held herself rigid, the fingers of one hand gripping motionlessly, a cluster of her dark curls.

"Well, I showed her the pardon. I lifted my finger, telling her to listen to the outcry in the market place, which was borne to us; and I explained to her that only by taking refuge in my house could she preserve herself from the savage anger of the town. Not until that last did her face lose its stoniness, did her eyes cease from looking balefully into mine.

"She raised them toward the beam; her fingers twitched amid her curls. "Oh, my mother—mother! mother!' she said, her lips so quivering that I believed she would fall to sobbing.

" 'Now, come at once with me, Nora', I said gently.

"She gave but one sob, a strange, sighing one, and her gaze returned to me.

" 'What if I ask Mr. Palmer to harbor me here?'

" 'I will not allow him.'

" 'I had wagered that—bully of every man!' Then she spoke with greater steadiness. 'You believe you are the winner betwixt us, but I believe I quoth true when I said I had witch's craft enough to keep myself out of your hands.'

" 'Come,' I said.

"She took her fingers from her curls and pointed to the pardon. 'Until that is given to Mr. Palmer, his warranty to release me, you can not force me to stir, or force any man to stir me, bully whom you shall. And I will not stir except Mr. Palmer comes hither to bid me, or Mr. Drew doth bid me.'

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"Drew was the chief turnkey, one of the two who had been conversing with her. He had been present at her mother's death, and—I suspected—had been pitying to the daughter.

"Frail though Nora's argument was, I made no dispute. I should get her more quickly to my coach by bending to her whim. I started immediately to go down to Palmer, beckoning to Drew to accompany me, so that Palmer could send him back for Nora. Then it came to my mind that her boast anent witch's craft might have some subtle meaning. What if she were planning to kill herself!

"At once I swung round and went to the entrance of the cell, whither the second turnkey was advancing. Nora stood much as I had left her.

"I intercepted the turnkey, whispered that he should watch her narrowly. Then, giving one more glance at the sweetly molded face and the eyes balefully following me, I rejoined Drew.

"I found Palmer and Jones and Sir Hugh Gerrow standing in a passage within the main door, with Ralph Timmins a yard or two from them waiting expectantly for me. Within a minute Palmer had dispatched Drew to bring Nora to us, and then I had leisure to note that Jones and Gerrow were even more cholerically silent than I had anticipated. I surmised that they had been examining my motive in taking Nora to my house.

"I let them have my back, and gazed along the passage to the stone stairs, looking for Nora to appear round the bend of them. Anon I recollected Ralph Timmins and gave him three guineas, which moved him to very many thanks. These, however, I scarce heeded, for I was watching the stairs again, exasperation growing in me as I realized that Nora was contriving a long delay.

" 'Palmer,' I said presently, 'that girl is making a to-do of sorts—the little ingrate! I beg you go yourself and fetch her.'

"I heard him take a step behind me. But then he spoke to Timmins:

" 'Ralph, go you and tell Drew to hasten with her.'

" 'Ay, go Ralph,' I said.

"Timmins mounted the stairs at his sharpest pace. My three guineas were spurring him. Yet when full time enough was passed for him to have reached Drew and one of them be back with Nora, no one came.

" 'They are seeking her hood or dusting her kirtle, or more like she is swooned with

happiness,' said Jones, on Palmer himself remarking that Ralph was somewhat long gone.

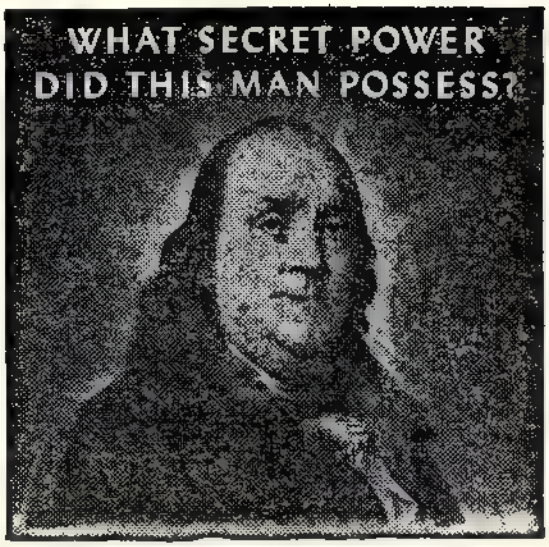
" 'Nay, tell the truth as it is,' said Gerrow. 'The maid is not over-raptured with Lambardiston . . . And, deuce take me!' he added, with his spleen coming to the surface; 'I can not tell why we stand to see the meeting of the child and the gentleman.'

"There was a considerable sneer about the last word which whipped my attention pretty smartly from the stairs. I faced round, and was on the point of retorting hotly, when I was diverted by the casting open of a door beside us. Three of my train-bandman stepped forth from a room. They saluted us, and two of them marched off. The third, a sergeant, paused to shut the door.

" 'Nay, leave it,' said Jones. 'We get some daylight thus . . . Faith!' he continued, as the sergeant went away; 'how queerly dark it hath grown in this last minute. A storm is on us.'

" ' 'Tis the suddenest thing,' said Gerrow with astonishment. He lifted his cane towards the barred aperture above the main door. 'Not a minute ago the sky yonder was fresh blue, Palmer; I was looking at it. See it now, the smokiest brown I ever beheld'—he broke off with an extraordinary gulp, flicking down his cane and jabbing the end hard upon the paved floor—'I—ever—beheld'—he repeated, sheer amazement in his voice—'save once, a wintry morning nigh thirteen years ago, when I stood in this very passage, and Ralph Timmins was gone up to hang this girl's mother—this girl's mother! . . . Jones, Palmer, do you mark the marvel of it? Here I stood, with Amphlett, the sheriff, and with Harry Lambardiston—Lambardiston's father. And up above there was death for a witch, as there was near to have been for her daughter in this hour—and that up above too, for there would have been dangerous trouble in the market place had she gone thither. List, you can hear the tumult from it. So we heard it then—and through this doorway—'

"GERROW moved athwart the room's doorway, and instantly his spare, elderly face was illumined by a sickly yellow



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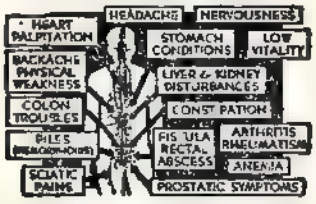

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light, which showed him staring ahead with something akin to fear, with his lips working.

" 'Yea, there it is' he cried, pointing shakily through the doorway. 'There is the self-same sky that was over us.'

"Now, having been preoccupied by Nora's tardiness, I had not noticed the change to gloom until Jones' speaking of it. In my surprise at perceiving how deep an obscurity was about us, save in the yellow light's path, I straightway forgot my anger against Gerrow; and, listening while he spoke of that other morning, I found myself remembering much that my father had said anent their standing in this passage. And when the dull, yellow glow swam over Gerrow's face I recalled vividly indeed how my father had spoken of the yellow light pouring through this very doorway—and in an instant, for no reason that I knew of, I felt my heart cold and heavy.

"I went to Gerrow's side and glanced through the doorway to the window beyond; and at that verily I got a shock. The sky was the sky of the morning when Mrs. Shafto was hanged. It was that same November sky—not a similitude made by the overcasting of the July sky. For the sun, seemingly, had fallen back from the height whence it shone as I walked to the jail, and was little risen; and it shone feebly through a gap molten in the thick murk—just as it had when I looked on it from the Red Bull in my boyhood. Its turbid light then had rendered Mrs. Shafto's coming death increasedly dreadful to me; but now, ere I had gazed on it five seconds, there slid over me a horror—on this morning when no execution was to be done!—a hundredfold worse than that which qualmed me when execution really was to be.

" 'Gerrow!' I breathed; and I looked at him.

"He was gripping his chin tightly. His eyes were expanding vacant. His mien was that of one dismayed to stupefaction by something he has discovered.

" ' 'Tis thirteen years ago,' he said, slurredly, for his grip was hampering his mouth. 'This day is thirteen years ago—we are in November, '67. . . . How can it be?'

" 'Gerrow!' I cried.

"His vacant eyes sought me. A startled glitter sprang up in them. He gaped, taking his hand from his chin and holding it, limp-fingered, towards me.

" 'Lambardiston,' he said, 'how like to your father you are! Why—why you are he! Harry—Harry Lambardiston, old friend!'

"His hand dropped in affection on my shoulder. I clasped his arm to push it away, but I heard Jones speak to Palmer, and his words arrested me in the act.

" 'Palmer,' he quoth heavily, 'my dear cousin, Ned Olpherts, is dead at last of the wounds the French gave him at Martinique.'

"Well did I know that Jones' cousin, Olpherts, lingering with wounds received in battle when fighting under Admiral Harman at Martinique, had died in November, '67.

"Palmer replied not, except to mumble of the fort at Tangier, and of the Moormen —seeming to believe himself in Africa, where once he had served.

"And then from the clock-house began to ring forth the hour of 9.

"I clutched hard on Gerrow's arm; for, though the sounds were not very near us, each stroke seemed to club my senses; and, what with the horrid yellow light, I was become giddy—helplessly giddy. And bemused too was I, in the strangest fashion, during a space. For, having reeled against a wall, pulling Gerrow with me, I leaned there thinking that my weakness and unaccountable dread were disgraceful to me who had gained such a repute for stout courage at the fight on Long Marston Moor; and full a minute must have passed ere I remembered that it was my father who fought at Long Marston—six years before I was born.

"I thrust Gerrow's arm from me. Still leaning, I noted that the others stood very quiet, their faces set in a wholly bewildered expression, yet their eyes restless, in a lethargic manner, dwelling now on mine, now on each other's.

"FOR a space we stayed thus without a word; each man, I should say, striving to adjust the disorder which he knew his

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thoughts were in, and wondering if all were as distraught as he.

"Then we were aroused—even as I perceived that the yellowness was going from the light and the passage brightening somewhat—by a footfall on the stone stairs.

"Ralph Timmins was descending alone. He came from step to step slowly, and despite the gloom that remained, and his distance from me, I saw that there was yet in his face a far greater confusion than had ever been in my companions. Confusion! It was the completest astoundment. Save that his pale blue eyes were wide open, as though from some waxing torment of his mind, he was in a stupor. He seemed a man midway between a dream that was terrible and an awakening that was more terrible.

"Above his streaked beard his cheeks were marble-white.

"Slowly he moved down. At the last step he tripped, nearly pitching on his head.

"It was then that Gerrow's voice rose in a very wail. 'Oh, see that!' he cried. 'What means it? What witch's craft is on us!'

"I had seen, with my father's saying of how Ralph Timmins had stumbled at the bottom step darting like a sword blade through my brain. That stumble, and Gerrow's final words, discovered the truth to me.

"I knew—ay, I knew what Timmins, coming drag-foot straight to me with his eyes now on my face, desperately questioning me, was going to say.

"I knew! My poor, wondrous little Nora, who deemed she had witch's craft enough to keep herself from me! How supremely had she wrought with her magic!

"Timmins stopped, and saluted me.

" 'Sir,' he said, 'I have put the young witch away, as your worship bid.'

"Knowing, I had waited petrified. But his words stung me to like—to madness. I shrieked twice or thrice, making the passage echo—Timmins crouching and wilting before me. With both hands I seized his neckcloth, tearing it off him as I strove to smash him against the wall. I struck him on the face. I wrung out my sword, cursing him, promising him every agony that man can inflict on man. Then—I can not tell

why, save that I was bereft of reason—I shouted:

" 'Bring her! Go, bring her down to me!' —menacing him with my point.

"He moved his hands hopelessly.

" 'Your worship, she is dead.'

" 'Bring her!' I screamed.

"He turned and went to the stairs. He mounted and was gone behind their bend; and once more I was watching those empty stone stairs. I felt a hand patting my arm. 'Twas Jones; for Gerrow, some way behind me, was saying: 'Look, blue sky and clear sunlight! . . . Man, open that door, I am nigh swooning.' And the main door grated open, which would be done by Palmer's hand.

"I took not my eyes from the stairs. I listened strainedly; and at last the sound of slow steps, the steps of someone descending sideways, with a burden, came to me from beyond the bend. And then appeared Nora's little feet in their gray hose—extended in the air, the shoon fallen off. I saw her kirtle edge; I saw her knees, swathed in her kirtle, half arched upon Timmins' arm. In another second I should have seen her face. But I could not endure that much. I leapt round with fresh and frantic screams and ran out to my coach."

OLD JEM put his hand over his eyes, remaining very still for a while.

"After the rain yesterday," he said, his voice gone wan and low, "I went walking, and came home by the horse-pool. I halted in the lane, thinking much on Nora. This is December month, but 'twas May to me in the lane; and how clear I could see Nora with her sweet, angered face, her poor little basket of flower roots—and her old knife, which I would, with all my heart! she had drove through and through me . . . Nora, dead these six-and-fifty years!"

He flung down his hand, raising his chin.

"There then," said he, "is my answer to you gentlemen who are so mighty scornful of witchcraft. Why Nora changed not into a bird or moth to escape me, why she spelled me not blind or cripple, I can not say. But in what she did, showed she not the supremest witchcraft that could be? She changed the sky, she threw back the

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year to thirteen years before; and while we in the passage were but half under her magic, which was enough for her, she so spell-bound Ralph Timmins and Drew, the turnkey, that without ado they hanged her from the beam in the cell, believing they were hanging her mother. . . . I made no endeavor afterwards to punish these fellows. Think you I would have spared them if the circumstances were not just as I have told you?"

OF THE listeners it was the parson who spoke. The hints of great sorrow which had come from Old Jem had not been without effect on him. So that, hateful though the picture of his host in early manhood was, he was no longer void of pity.

"Mr. Lambardiston," he said, and his tones were gentle, "I hold your story of this awful happening to be true in every word—so far as that happening was understood by you and others. But I deem you have erred as to the real nature of it . . . I can not believe it was any witchcraft of Nora Shafto that took her from you."

"Could aught save witchcraft have done it?" exclaimed Old Jem with rising anger.

"Yes," answered the parson. For a moment he was silent, then: 'Mr. Lambardiston, this is to be a reply to your question, 'Could aught?' 'Tis no attempt to interpret—I would not dare so to interpret—the happening . . . Of poor little Nora Shafto you have used the word 'supreme.' Bethink you, is not that word often given to a Veritable Power far asunder from witchcraft? The Supreme Power which stayed the sun upon Gibeon and the moon in the valley of Ajalon, which thrust back the shadow on the sundial, could with equal ease have transmuted the years for you that were in the jail—decreeing that thus should Nora, who, for all her childish vauntings of witchcraft, was truly 'white-souled as an angel'—" The speaker paused. "Decreeing that thus should Nora go to her mother," he ended mercifully.

For the color had ebbed from Old Jem's cheeks, the very purple of his lips was mud-hue, and consternation and growing despair were in his face.

"I had not thought of that!" said the old man whisperingly. "If that should be the right answer to all of it, Parson!" Then a new expression crossed his face, and during an instant his voice was firmer. "For Nora's sake I hope it is, for that means heaven for her! . . . But if it is the answer, Parson—what is ever going to become of me?"

"I believe such things as that hope for Nora's sake do make some little plea for us," said the parson quietly. "Also—"

The courtly king's messenger nudged the scrivener with his knee.

The two got up and lit their pipes at the far end of the room, noting that the parson left his chair and took one beside Old Jem.

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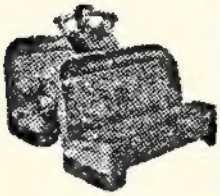

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